

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Are you eating healthily: A Healthy Appetite - Hebrews 5:11-14

We hear so much today about healthy eating. We get lots of advice, often confusing, about what we should or should not eat. Recently I came across a list of superfoods that experts are encouraging us to include in our diet. Foods like turkey and blueberries amongst others. This is not a new idea. The Bible mentions superfoods. There was the "manna" that sustained the children of Israel during their wilderness journey. There were the vegetables that Daniel and his friends ate, and John the Baptist's diet of locusts and wild honey.

Of course, to enjoy food you need an appetite. It does not matter how much good food there is, it will not do you any good unless you have the appetite to eat it.

Appetite can mean a desire for food or drink; a desire to satisfy a need or craving; or a desire, liking, or taste for something. We can have an appetite for things that do us no good – too many chips or hamburgers, for example. Our appetite can also exceed our need and we put weight on. When we are ill or worried we can lose our appetite. On the other hand, a healthy appetite can mature. Not many children like sprouts but lots of adults do like them. There is no doubt our appetite affects our health and well-being. We are familiar with all these facts and this morning I am going to use some of them to explore our spiritual appetite as Christians.

When we are troubled or our faith is tested, like Peter, we can get away from the Lord. We may even backslide and lose contact with Christian fellowship and our appetite for the things of God altogether. Sometimes other things replace the desire for the God's word. We can also have a great intellectual interest in the Bible but not be very good at living it out day by day. We eat a lot but we don't exercise much. On the other hand, we can have a healthy spiritual appetite and grow and mature as Christians. This enables us to help and encourage other believers and serve God effectively.

Let's look at the experience of the readers of the book of Hebrews. In 5:11-14 the writer of the Hebrews was about to develop the subject of Melchizedek, the mysterious King of Salem and priest of the Most High God (Hebrews 7:1). He uses this great man as an illustration of Christ's present ministry as our High Priest in heaven. It was a subject that needed explanation, and the writer raises concerns about his Hebrew readers. He writes, "...the order of Melchizedek, of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

The readers of Hebrews are described as being "dull of hearing". They should have been teachers but instead they needed to be instructed like children rather than mature adults. This small passage raises some important questions.

Hebrews was written some thirty years after Pentecost. At Pentecost, thousands of people of Jewish background came to know Christ as their Saviour. These first Christians knew the Scriptures well. All the evidence is that the first generation Christians had a great appetite for the word of God. In Acts 8:4 we read, "Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." In Berea, in Acts 17, we read, "they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." There was a great interest in the word of God, a real desire both to obey it and share it.

Over the course of time this appetite had diminished amongst some Christians. This problem was not a new thing. It is interesting that in the Old Testament in Numbers 21:5 the people complained about the manna God had fed them with, "And the people spoke against God and against Moses: 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.'"

Deuteronomy 8:3 explains the lesson God was teaching his people in the wilderness, "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."

This is the very Scripture the Lord Jesus used against Satan when He was tested by the Devil in the wilderness in Matthew 4:4, "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.'"

I do not think the Hebrew readers loathed the word of God but, for whatever reason, they had lost their appetite for understanding and applying the Scriptures in their lives. What about you and me?

The result was that instead of being mature Christians able to teach others the Hebrews appeared to have regressed and needed to be taught again the first principles of the oracles of God. They are described as needing milk not solid food. The oracles of God refer in the New Testament to the contents of the Mosaic Law (Acts 7:38), God speaking through the Old Testament writers (Romans 3:2), Christian doctrine (Hebrews 5:12) and God speaking through Christian teachers (1 Peter 4:11).

Milk is used in different ways in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 2:2, Peter writes "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" here Peter is emphasising the suitability of the food provided when a child is born that will enable both its growth and protection from infection. Peter is stressing not so much Christian immaturity but the quality of the food God provides in His word and the spiritual growth it produces in the Christian. Not only are we born again by the Word of God, but it is also our nourishment throughout our lives. A newborn child has an eagerness to receive what results in his growth and strength. This appetite for God's word that we have at the outset of our Christian lives should never leave us. This was true for the elders Peter addresses in 1 Peter 5, as well as the young Christians.

It was this appetite the Hebrews had lost. Instead of going forward they appear to have gone backward. Milk is used in Hebrews in a different way to how Peter uses it. In today's chapter it not used so much to describe the quality of the food but the needs of immature believers. You cannot give a baby adult meals! A child has to be weaned and gradually introduced to solid food.

Sadly many Christians are in danger of remaining immature. They can have the knowledge of salvation but not be growing spiritually because, like the Hebrews, they have become "dull of hearing" and other appetites have taken the place of their spiritual appetite.

In Matthew 13:23, Jesus links hearing to a fruitful Christian life, "But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." It is vital that we don't lose the ability to listen and respond to the word of God, so becoming dull of hearing.

God wants us to have a full understanding of the His word. He looks for growth in His children. We all get excited when our children speak their first words or take their first steps; when they go to school; when they pass their exams or driving test; when they marry, set up home, have children and take on life's responsibilities. Our heavenly Father is the same. He looks for spiritual maturity.

It is interesting that the first man and woman were created as mature people. Adam and Eve had no childhood. It is astounding that the Son of God knew infancy, childhood and what it was to be a young person and a grown man. This cycle of growth that we see in the physical world is also seen in our spiritual lives. And it is founded on our spiritual appetite and the spiritual food we consume.

Just as in the physical world we choose our diets and as a result of these choices our health is affected, so in the spiritual realm we make choices that determine our spiritual health.

Verses 13 and 14 go on to explain, "For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

Spiritual growth is not simply about gaining knowledge; it is about a way of life that is defined by faith and obedience and that produces the "fruit of the Spirit" described in Galatians 5. The apostles constantly reminded their listeners of the need to have a life that was consistent with the faith they possessed. The Hebrews' testimony was endangered by a tendency to go back to Judaism and its historic practices that Christ had superseded.

We have a similar example with the Galatians who, after being saved by grace, were in danger of returning to the Law. Paul had to write, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision

avails anything, but faith working through love. You ran well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion does not come from Him who calls you.” (Galatians 5:1-8).

Now we may think that these problems do not affect us today. But we are all susceptible to losing the spiritual appetite God has given by such things as familiarity, ritual, habit, materialism, dependence on our own experiences, self-confidence, legalism and the world. The Devil will use whatever means possible to move us away from a simple trust in God’s word and in doing so weaken and, if possible, destroy our Christian testimony.

Adam and Eve were the first victims of this strategy, “Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said, “You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”’” (Genesis 3:1).

As we have seen, when the Lord Jesus is faced with a similar approach His defence is the word of God, “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).

We see the perfect spiritual appetite described in the life of the Lord Jesus. An example of this is in John 4 where Jesus is described as “being wearied from His journey”. After talking to the woman at the well and bringing her to a knowledge of Himself as the Christ, His disciples return: “In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, eat.’ But He said to them, ‘I have food to eat of which you do not know.’ Therefore the disciples said to one another, ‘Has anyone brought Him anything to eat?’ Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work’” (John 4:31-34).

In this example the Lord Jesus demonstrates an appetite to bring people to know Him as the Saviour. This is an important aspect of the Christian’s witness. Having an appetite for the word of God brings us into the presence of God and transforms us into the likeness of Christ. “Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). In other words, by having an appetite to be in communion with Christ we became more Christlike. This also gives us the desire not to exclude others, but to bring them into the same fellowship of life.

Salvation in Christ, communion with Christ, and witnessing to Christ are clearly seen in the story of Legion in Mark 5. Jesus saved Legion from his demon possession and Legion is described as “sitting and clothed and in his right mind” (verse 15). The first instinct or appetite of this redeemed man is to be with Jesus. “And when He [Jesus] got into the boat, he who had been demon-possessed begged Him that he might be with Him. However, Jesus did not permit him, but said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.’ And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marvelled.” Legion’s experience of Christ’s salvation and his obedience to His word enabled him to serve Christ effectively.

The Christian’s spiritual appetite can be endangered by three things which are in opposition to God. These are the Devil, the flesh and the world.

We have already touched on the “wiles of the Devil” as Paul puts it in Ephesians 6:11. Our defence is the example of the Lord Jesus.

The issue of the flesh is dealt with in Galatians 5:16, “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.” Here it is the Spirit who empowers us to overcome the appetites of the flesh described in verses 19 and 20, “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies.”

By feeding our new spiritual appetite with the word of God we produce the fruit of the Spirit, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22-23).

The Spirit teaches us instinctively what is good for us and we have then to be obedient to that teaching. The difficulty is not in knowing what God’s will is but in doing it. We can so easily give way to our old nature and its appetites rather than through obedience producing the fruit of the Spirit. This is a constant test of faith. But the testing is designed to make us stronger. The great athlete is the disciplined athlete as Paul explains in 2 Timothy 2:5: “And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.”

Finally, the issue of the world is addressed in 1 John 2:15-16, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life - is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

These dangers we face from within ourselves, that is our old nature; from the world we live in, and from unseen spiritual forces of wickedness described by Paul in Ephesians 6:11-13, "Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

The Lord Jesus presents Himself as the bread from heaven in John 6:32-35, "Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' Then they said to Him, 'Lord, give us this bread always.' And Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.'"

In verse 38 He adds, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

In summary the Christian's appetite has many facets. There is the desire for communion, worship and service. There is the desire to live for God in a world where Christ is still rejected. There is the desire to overcome our sinful nature and to bear the fruit of the Spirit. There is the desire to grow. There is the desire to share the Gospel and there is also the desire for Christ's return.

And as we have seen, there are forces which oppose our appetite and offer alternatives in order to diminish and ultimately destroy our Christian witness.

In John 6:27, the Lord encourages the right appetite, "Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

Psalms 1 gives an excellent description of the balanced, mature and fruitful Christian life: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper."

We often get concerned about our physical appearance, health and diet. We are constantly encouraged to reassess our lives in terms of diet and exercise. As we start another week, perhaps now is the time to reassess our spiritual appetite and diet. What are we responding to and feeding on? Is God's word exercising our minds and hearts? We cannot do better than close with Paul's challenging words: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (Romans 12:1-2)

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