

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 11 June 2007

No. T0473

Speaker: Mr. Ian Britton

Are you eating healthily: Eating to live - John 6

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach”. This isn’t very good biology, but it conveys the truth that what we eat can influence us enormously. Eating is a modern obsession that has spawned a vast industry, both to produce food, and to advise us what is, and is not, good for us. Today we start a new series called “Are you eating healthily?” It will not offer any tips on the latest celebrity diet, or which vegetables to eat for shinier hair; but the four talks will take you back to the Bible to see how what we feed on spiritually is vitally important to every Christian. The later talks will look at “Food for thought”, that is how we need to be careful what we think about; “A healthy appetite”, that is moving on to Christian maturity; and finally “Feeding the flock”, that is our part in giving spiritual food to others. Today we start the series with a look at John 6 under the title “Eating to live”.

We will consider our topic under four headings:

1. Why we must eat to live
2. How we can eat to live
3. The kind of life given
4. Suitable food for this new life.

But first, let’s take a look at the background of our chapter.

The chapter begins with an account of the miracle we usually call the feeding of the five thousand. A great crowd have followed Jesus for days, listening to His teaching. Now they are hungry and weary. John has previously shown us the Lord Jesus Himself hungry, thirsty and weary, by a well in Samaria, so He appreciates their condition and, in His compassion, provides more than enough food for all from just five loaves and two small fish. More than compassion is involved. In John’s Gospel the miracles are not just remarkable events, they are signs. In other words, they show to the people who witness them evidence of a heavenly fact. In this case, it is a sign that the creator God is present. Nobody else can multiply matter in this way. Although the people did not understand who Jesus was, they were sufficiently enthusiastic about a free lunch to wish to make Jesus a king by force. Jesus sends them away. He then shows His great power to His disciples privately, by His walking to meet them on the water. The next day the people press to see Jesus again and are intrigued by how He can have got across the lake when He was not in the boat with the disciples. As always, Jesus sees straight into people’s hearts, and tells them that they are not truly interested in signs, but in having their stomachs filled! He advises them, “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.” John 6:27. For the next twenty two verses, Jesus expands on this subject, describing Himself variously as: “the true bread from heaven” verse 32, “the bread of God” verse 33, “I am the bread of life” verses 35 and 48 and “the living bread” verse 51.

1. Why we must eat to live

“Superfoods” are often talked about today. These are foods that are not just nourishing but are supposed to do us positive good, curing disease and extending life. A new word has even been invented to describe them: **Nutraceutical**. It is a combination of nutrition and pharmaceutical, and means foods that are claimed to have a medicinal effect on human health. Despite all the claims for “superfoods” and some are rather fanciful, nobody has ever claimed that any of them can actually produce life. They might claim to add a few months, or years, to our lifespan, but not to raise the dead! The Lord Jesus claimed that the food He was describing would “give life to the world” verse 33 and that life would be “eternal life” verse 54. This infers that we need to be given life, that, without Him, we are all dead. The Lord expands this theme with an extended comparison of the manna, which the Israelites ate in the wilderness, and Himself as the living bread. It is the crowd who first raise the subject of manna in verse 31. They throw it out as a kind of challenge to Jesus. We could sum up their argument like this: “What sign are you going to show to prove you are come from God? Moses, our great Jewish leader, gave us manna from heaven for forty years. What can you produce?” The first thing that Jesus points out, in verse 32, is that Moses himself did not give the people bread from heaven, God did! Moses was a great man but he was a human being, from earth. In contrast, Jesus was, as God, eternally a resident of heaven. He came down from there as the gift of God to give life to the world. Wonderful though God’s provision of the manna was, it had at least four limitations:

- a. It was physical food only
- b. It was consumed and gone when you had eaten it
- c. After you had eaten it you were soon hungry again
- d. Everybody who ate is now dead!

By contrast the “true bread from heaven” is:

- a. Spiritual in nature
- b. Infinite in supply and never used up
- c. If you eat it you will never hunger and never thirst
- d. Those who eat it will not, and cannot, die.

The people who ate manna in the wilderness were, with a very few exceptions, spiritually dead. They had no real faith in God. The manna did not give a single one of them new life. Nor could it even perpetuate physical life for long. Verse 58 says, “...your fathers ate the manna, and are dead”. Like the Israelites, we all begin as spiritually dead. We have no life or energy toward God. This is why we need to eat to live.

2. How we can eat to live

If we need a new life, where can it be found? Jesus answers the question fully in this chapter. We have already noted that Jesus describes Himself as having come down from heaven. This is the first vital point. All life, of every kind, spiritual and natural, animal and plant, comes from God. God is the only possible source of any life. Therefore if anyone is to “give life to the world”, He must be God from heaven. The Jews would not accept this. They thought they knew Jesus’ father and mother and believed that He came from Galilee, not heaven. Nobody who does not accept Jesus as God can receive new life from Him. In the section of our chapter from verses 51 to 58, the Lord refers often to His flesh and His blood. Let’s read verses 51 to 55 before commenting on them: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world’. The Jews therefore quarrelled among themselves, saying, ‘How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.’” Why did the Lord emphasise His flesh and blood? Two main ideas are presented:

1. Jesus’ incarnation was essential for this new life to be given. As God, Jesus did not have flesh and blood. Our salvation not only requires that Jesus is God, but also that He became a man.
2. There is no doubt at all that Jesus was referring to His death. In the Bible, when flesh (the body) and blood are seen separated, the thought presented is death. This is why we have bread and wine as the memorial of Christ’s death in the Lord’s Supper, or communion service. The blood is what gives life, so when blood is separated from the flesh, we have death. Our salvation then is also dependent on the sacrificial death of the Lord Jesus.

This explains how life has become available. The remaining question is how can I receive it? The answer Jesus gives is “by eating”. Imagine I am really hungry and a beautiful, freshly baked loaf of bread is on the table in front of me. I have been told that it is for me, but I stand still, just enjoying the wonderful smell for a moment. I now have a simple choice. If I want to satisfy my hunger, and enjoy the taste and nutrition, I must perform the simple act of reaching out, taking the bread and eating it. So it was when Christ was first presented to us as Saviour. There He was, absolutely all that we needed and desired. We then had to take that step of faith and make Him our own. That is the eating that we have here: a definite and deliberate action to take Christ as Saviour. In verses 51 and 53, the word used for ‘eat’ would be literally translated ‘shall have eaten’. It is a once and for all action, that has taken place at our conversion. Once eaten, food is built into the fabric of your body; it becomes a vital part of you. You cannot extract it again. So once eternal life is received with Christ it is yours for ever.

3. The kind of life given

At the beginning of today’s talk, we commented that no “superfood” could raise the dead. Even if they could, they would only restore the same, natural life that a person had before they died. When we ate to live by accepting Jesus as Saviour, we did not receive another natural life that just goes on longer than our previous one. Nor did we get put back into the state of innocence that Adam and Eve were in before they sinned. If either of these were true we would simply have the new life ruined again by new sins, and our life would quickly be lost once more. Jesus said specifically that this new life was “eternal” (verse 54) and that those who have it will “not die” (verse 50). The first answer to the question, “what kind of life?” is eternal life. Eternal life means more than just life that lasts forever so the second

answer to the question “what kind of life?” is, a life of the same nature as Christ Himself. John spells this out clearly in his epistles. In 1 John 3:9 we read, “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” It is clear that the new life in a Christian is quite unlike the old life. It is totally incapable of sin, in the same way that the Lord Jesus Himself could not sin. This has to be so since it is Christ’s life that is given to us. As far as God is concerned, my old life died with Christ and was buried with Christ. When Christ rose again, I was raised with Him, sharing the same life. Experience tells me that I, as a person, still sin, but the Bible declares that this is my old life at work. The new life is totally incorruptible, a life that pleases God and is suitable for heaven.

4. Suitable food for this new life

Different people like different foods. My idea of luxury is a thick vanilla slice and a cup of strong coffee. You might be turning your nose up at the thought! More fundamentally, different kinds of life need different foods. Sheep eat grass. Wolves could not possibly digest grass, but would love a nice young lamb! Most of us think chocolate is a treat; to dogs it is poisonous. No animal would survive long planted in the desert sand like a cactus. This is not a question of taste. Each life has its own specific needs. It is the same with our new spiritual life. It cannot feed on physical food and drink, or even on the same pastimes and pleasures that nourish our old nature. It has its own special diet. The next two talks in this series will look in much more detail at what is required to feed the new man inside a Christian. Today we will look at the one main feature. The diet for our new life is extremely simple: it is the Lord Jesus Himself.

We noticed earlier that in verses 51 and 53 the word for ‘eat’ is literally ‘shall have eaten’. In the later verses, the word used is in the normal, present tense. These verses indicate that, although we initially need to eat the living bread as a one off action, this is not the end of our eating. Subsequently we must continue to feed on that same living bread. It is apparent that we can only accept Christ as Saviour once, so these verses must indicate something a little different. What they refer to is a continued meditation on Christ, and especially Christ in His death. We trusted completely and solely in Christ for our salvation. We did not add anything of our own works, or other men’s ideas. Once that new life is ours, its only food is the Lord Jesus Himself. Of course, we will value sermons and books that help us to understand the things of the Lord Jesus, and we will certainly need the company of other Christians. These things are vital. What this passage shows us is that they are vital because they contribute to our understanding and appreciation of our Lord. They are not ends in themselves.

If we are honest, we will confess that often we do not feel like reading our Bible or meditating on the Lord Jesus. This is a sign that something has gone wrong in our lives. The normal experience of a Christian is expressed in Psalm 42:1: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God.” The honest truth is that searching the scriptures for Christ often seems like a duty that is both hard going and unrewarding. I say again that this is a sign of something wrong. The new life inside me follows after Christ perfectly naturally. I do not need to manufacture enthusiasm or earnestness; they will come out quite freely from the life of Christ within me. Why is this not always what we experience? Perhaps we are spiritually malnourished. If you went without food for a few hours you would get hungry. If you went without for several days, you would not be able to think about anything else but food! Extend this into a week or more though, and you will start to become so weak that you actually lose appetite, and you may not even be able to eat, even when food is given to you. Too much time without feeding on Christ can also lead to a damaging loss of appetite. The best way out of this problem is not to sit feeling guilty about our failure. Nor is it to wait until you feel more inclined to pray and read your Bible. It is certainly not to try and make yourself feel keener, or produce some spiritual desires by an exercise of will power. The best way is to start eating! Briefly confess how you feel to the Lord Himself, and start reading His word and thinking about Him. We have said that John 6 focuses not just on Christ, but on His death, and reading about His death and considering what it has accomplished for us, is a great way to rekindle your appetite.

The act of feeding will keep us closer to the Lord Jesus. In verse 56 He says, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.” Indeed, in the next verse He goes on to liken this to His relationship with His Father. “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so He who feeds on Me will live because of Me.” Christ did not live on this earth independently of the Father and those who feed on Him should not move independently of the One whose life we share. In John 4, after Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman, He told the disciples, “I have food to eat of which you do not know ... My food is to do the will of Him who sent me”. When somebody finds a task easy and natural, we sometimes say “it is like meat and drink to them”. We mean that it is so simple and natural that, rather than being an effort, it is actually a positive joy. So it was to the Lord Jesus. Doing the Father’s will was a joy to Him and seeking after the Lord Jesus should be a joy to me.

It may be worth spending a short time considering what eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood does **not** mean. This chapter cannot be used to support the teaching known as transubstantiation. This teaching claims that the bread and wine taken during communion change into the body and blood of Christ. This cannot be true because Christ is not dead today, nor can He ever die again! Jesus is now risen, ascended and glorified. The Lord’s Supper is a

remembrance of what He once did, not a repetition. Feeding on Christ and His death is taking in what He has already accomplished.

To conclude we will go back and think again about verse 27 which we quoted earlier, “Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life”. Jesus challenged His hearers to change their focus from the physical to the spiritual. What are the most important things in my life? A good way to find out is to consider how I spend my time. Obviously I have to spend a large number of hours sleeping and working but I need to consider what I might call my disposable, or discretionary, time. In the hours, or minutes, each day when I can actually choose what I am going to do, what are my priorities? I sometimes try and convince myself that if I had more free time I would pray and read my Bible more. The harsh reality is that if I do not choose to concentrate on these when I have a free five minutes, I will not concentrate on them if I have five hours to spare! I have always loved reading. When I was younger I used to devour books. I really did have an appetite for reading. I would get five books from the library on Monday, finish them and return them by Friday. I always had a book in my hand, and would use every spare moment to read. There was no doubting what my number one priority was; you could measure it in hours and minutes. It might not have always been healthy, but it was never an effort or a chore. I didn't read to impress people, but for pleasure. There are times, nowhere near often enough, when I feel the same way now about spending time feeding on the Lord. Then time spent considering Him just flies by, and I turn to prayer naturally and enthusiastically.

There is certainly no harm in eating healthier food, and perhaps many of us need to lose a pound or two. Of far greater importance is to have eaten of Christ for eternal life and to go on feeding our souls on Him. In the words of William Williams' famous hymn:

*Bread of heaven, bread of heaven
Feed me now and evermore.*

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.