

Theses on Food and Feasting

Rich Lusk

Jesus made it clear we are not defined by what goes into our mouths but what comes out of them (Mark 7). To call some foods "clean" or to say there is such a thing "clean eating" (and therefore also "unclean eating") is virtually blasphemous because it directly contradicts the words of Christ. What makes eating clean is *not* what we choose to eat, but *giving God thanks for what we choose to eat*, whatever it might be. Everything is sanctified — made clean, holy — by thanksgiving (1 Timothy 4). Satan is ultimately behind all our false food doctrines. We should not turn what we eat into a moral issue. That's not to say we can't have preferences based on taste or our beliefs about what is healthy. But we should not categorize food preferences in a moral way. To do so is legalism and undermines the goodness of creation. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

--

One of the unhealthiest things you can do is try too hard to eat healthy. Being underweight is often far worse than being overweight. Obesity is a problem, but actually not as big of a threat to one's health as anorexia. Following dieting fads, changing up diets, extreme diets that totally cut out certain types of food, are often dangerous. We should avoid running food experiments on ourselves.

--

The science of health keeps changing, e.g., "enriched" in the 80s vs. "organic" today, but these fads are driven more by marketers and advertisers than anything. As is often the case, the science of diet is not pure; it's driven by money and agendas. Don't be gullible, and don't let the food corporations suck you in because of naïveté. What you can buy at Whole Foods or the farmer's market is made up of chemicals just as much as what you buy at Walmart -- and generally the same chemicals. This does not mean all food is of the same quality, but it does mean we should not exaggerate the differences — even if we are willing to pay for them. We should also recognize that shopping at higher end grocery stores and markets is a luxury not everyone is able to afford. And, yes, it really is a luxury, not a

necessity. Getting groceries from Walmart will not kill you. Eat as healthy as you know how to eat on a budget you can afford, and trust your health to God. Don't shame people who have different beliefs about what is healthy or who cannot afford the same kind of groceries and restaurants.

--

Satan attacked Adam and his wife at the table -- with a food test -- in the Garden of Eden. By eating in rebellion, they were divided from God and from each other. The rest of the Bible is full of food tests (e.g., the Israelites in the wilderness, who grumbled and longed for a return to the food of Egypt; Jesus in the wilderness, who resisted Satan's temptation to turn stones to bread; Jesus testing the boundaries of the Pharisees love by eating and drinking with sinners; Peter withdrawing from table fellowship with Gentiles and thus denying the gospel, as recorded in Galatians 2; etc.). Each time one of these food tests is passed, there is great fellowship and celebration. But when the food test is failed, there is horrific division and misery. God does not want us to fight each other over food -- no food fights in church! He wants us to use food as a means of communion with him and with one another. Dietary choices should never come between us. Meals are about loving people more than loving food (though we can do both -- we just need to make sure we love people more!). Proverbs 15:17 should be our rule. Better to have a Whopper with love than a five star meal with discord.

--

Insofar as there is a key to health, it is not found primarily in dieting techniques or exercise routines, but in faith and obedience (1 Tim. 4:8). Everything we eat is dead; the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, keeps us alive. The Lord gives or takes health as he sees fit. Be smart about what you eat, use the moderation that comes with common sense, but don't overthink or over-analyze it because you do not know nearly as much about food as you think you do. Don't believe the labels — be suspicious of everyone who is trying to sell you something. Recognize that "health food" is big business and learn to practice discernment. Make sure you exercise and get enough sleep. Live a disciplined life. But remember that your life is in the

Lord's hands.

--

Nothing — absolutely nothing — you eat should make you feel guilty. Just give thanks and enjoy it (see 1 Timothy 4). If Jesus has declared all foods clean, who are we to declare some of them unclean (or act as if they were unclean)? The Lord's Supper should be the pattern for every meal. Share with those at the table, love your neighbor, and eat with joy, knowing God has accepted you.

Likewise nothing — absolutely — nothing you eat should make you feel righteous, as if you were better than others who did not share your convictions or preferences about food. In the New Testament, there is one food law. It was given at the Lord's Table, when Jesus said, "Do this as my memorial." Besides eating bread and wine at the Lord's table, we are free to eat whatever we want. Yes, free!

We need to take our food choices out of the realm of morality altogether. *What* we eat has nothing to do with sin or righteousness, and so there should be no fear, guilt, shame, or anxiety surrounding food. All food phobias are at root due to a loss of faith in the goodness of creation and the gospel of redemption to one degree or another. *How* we eat — that is, how we treat and interact with our table companions — certainly is a moral issue. If we let our food preferences get in way of kindness to others, if we make eating the way we want to eat more important than building community, then we are displeasing God. Food and fellowship should go together. When food isolates rather than builds community, it is being misused and abused.

--

Obsession with health is unhealthy. It all too easily leads to foodolatry. And food makes for a terrible, merciless god. Food cannot forgive you when you "cheat" and cannot truly satisfy your deepest hungers. See John 6 for the bread and drink that really do slake hunger and thirst.

Likewise, while we should follow the advice of the apostle Paul and

get regular exercise (1 Tim. 4:8), we should avoid obsessing over exercise routines. Some people get so addicted to exercise, it affects the way they treat others and keeps them from fulfilling more central responsibilities. A balanced, wise life will keep proper priorities and perspective.

--

There are certainly many ways to develop an unhealthy relationship with food. Overeating, under-eating, being too picky, etc. All of these issues come down to stewardship. We must learn to be good stewards of our bodies and our food budgets. We must learn what matters to God and what doesn't. God does not care what we eat provided we give him thanks. But God certainly cares about how we treat those we eat with. God does not want us to starve ourselves — this would imply that God is stingy, or the things he provides aren't really good for us. Nor does God want us to over indulge ourselves, acting as if the pleasure we get from food is the essence of life. Self-discipline is important in every area of life, including our food choices.

--

Some generalities: The sickliest people I know are the people who are totally focused on eating healthy. And the healthiest people I know are those who give little thought about trying to eat super healthy. That's not always the case, but it often is. Beware of extremes. Trust God.

--

What about our relationship to the food industry? Does it matter how we get our food? Does it need to be free range, fair trade, etc.?

Several things should be kept in mind here. We are not responsible for everything that has happened to the food we eat, as it made its way to our table. Paul gives us a great deal of freedom in how we engage in and participate in our culture and economy in 1 Corinthians 10. So there's no need to ask too many questions or get overly scrupulous. If Paul told the Corinthians they are not guilty of idolatry when they purchase meat in the marketplace that has been

offered to idols, surely there are limits on our moral responsibility when it comes to how the animals were treated, how the workers were treated, how the food was produced, etc. In many cases, we just aren't going to have answers to those questions and even if we start asking them, getting true and accurate answers may be next to impossible. At the same time, all things being equal, we should favor farmers who treat their animals with care and respect (Prov. 12:10), and we should want workers to be treated well and paid fairly (James 5:4). If we can knowingly support such practices, that is wonderful. But again, beware of marketing schemes and trendiness. And don't make a moral issue out of this (saying, e.g., it is more holy to righteous to seek our "fair trade" products) because Paul did not do so in 1 Corinthians 10.

What about genetically engineered foods? What about GMOs? "Genetically modified" is a misused and misunderstood term. "Frankenfoods" are not what we think. Applying science to farming and agricultural practices — which is really what we are talking about here — has been incredibly successful. Virtually everything we eat — even those foods we consider most natural — have been heavily modified by man's intervention (e.g., the corn you buy at a local farmer's market has been genetically engineered over the centuries and is very different than corn that was eaten a thousand years ago). Man has been genetically modifying plants and animals for millennia, and this is just an aspect of our dominion over creation. It is nothing to be afraid of; indeed, it has allowed us to feed the world far better than at any other time in history. And, frankly, there is no alternative, unless we are indifferent to millions starving to death. Overall, the world is far, far more healthy and prosperous than it ever has been, and this largely due to man's engagement with nature. Genetically modified foods are more nutritious, reduce the need for pesticides, lowers costs to the benefit of the world's poor, and can be grown far more efficiently. Genetically modified foods have an excellent track record and to oppose them is to oppose scientific progress. There is nothing to be scared of when it comes to GMOs (and quite honestly, you cannot escape GMOs anyway, no matter how hard you try).

That's not to say that the food industry is righteous or that have been no abuses. But in general, God has enabled us to take dominion over

the creation in such a way that we can get more out of it with less labor. If anyone questions the value of humans engaging in genetic modifications, just consider dogs. The wondrous variety of breeds are all the result of human tinkering with canine genetics. If genetically modified canines have been good for the human race, why can't the same be true of various kinds of food?

--

Idolatry of food / eating is really idolatry of the self. It is completely self-focused; it is self-love at the expense of neighbor-love. It is a way of curving in on oneself. It centers attention on what is *on* the table of who is seated *at* the table.

This is why various eating disorders are almost always connected to other kinds of disorders, such as anxiety and depression. It is not always easy to tell what kinds of behaviors are due to a mental illness that can be treated medically and which are simply the result of sin and require repentance. We should be compassionate towards those who struggle. But we should also remember that God's standards do not change and selfish behavior can never be excused.

--

Are you anxious about what you eat? Eat that thing that makes you most anxious, just to prove to yourself that you can. The best thing to do with false scruples is violate them (with a tip of the hat to Luther!). Satan wants you to be a slave to false scruples; Jesus wants you to smash them.

--

Doug Wilson has pointed out that there is a rise in eating disorders alongside an increase in fatherlessness in our culture. There certainly could be a correlation between our culture's widespread food issues and father hunger. But if so, eating disorders can really only be dealt with by turning to the true Father. Only his love can fill us up. We must learn to trust in his provision and rest in his grace and find our identity in his acceptance and adoption of us. Behind all our other hungers is father hunger -- so look to the Father to satisfy you with

the gift of himself.

--

We might think when it comes to food, the devil's strategy would be to get us to gorge ourselves, to overeat, to feast with reckless abandon. Surely he does that at times. But according to 1 Timothy 4, his more common strategy is to get us to become food Pharisees, food legalists, food prohibitionists. He wants us to think of our Heavenly Father as stingy, as a poor provider. Satan wins when we forget the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof, and it is all given to us a gift of grace. (Likewise, in 1 Timothy 4, the man with the seared conscience is not the lawless, carnally minded rebel -- though that can happen. Rather, a seared conscience here is seen in legalistic tendencies, legislating for others especially in the areas of food and sex. The Lord gives and the Lord may take away, but the devil only takes and never gives. The devil has no gifts, but our Father above certainly does!)

--

Extreme dieting, anorexia, "almost anorexia," orthorexia, etc. are almost always driven not by a love for one's body, but by a gnostic despising of one's body. They are the opposite of stewardship; they are forms of self-abuse. The girl who thinks she is fat when she is not has been duped by a lie from the pit of hell.

We have to ask: what is the body for? The body is not just an object to be gazed upon, and therefore kept in pristine condition, shaped by the culture's (usually very unrealistic) notions of attractiveness. In truth, the body is a tool to be used in the service of righteousness (cf. Romans 6). Your body is not your own; it was bought and redeemed with a price, the price of Christ's blood (1 Corinthians). In our culture, this is especially important for women to understand. For example: If cultural ideals lead a woman to be so skinny that her body is no longer able to mother children, she has sacrificed her body's God-ordained, God-designed use on the altar of a false cultural expectation. If cultural ideals have led her to starve herself so she can no longer energetically serve others with joy, or eat freely with others, then she has denied her body's God-given function.

--

Anorexia: destroying one's life, health, family, and career in order to look like death warmed over. The anorexic has been duped into thinking food is dangerous, when in truth it is God's glorious gift to us. God gave us the world, so we could consume it, use it, enjoy it. There is no need to fear any food. This is not to say overcoming anorexia (or another eating disorder) is any easier than overcoming other similar types of issues, like alcohol addiction or pornography addiction. These issues can be complex; helping someone with an eating disorder to normalize their eating requires compassion, wisdom, and commitment. But knowing the end goal, and knowing what freedom in Christ looks like, certainly helps. At the root of all of these issues is a self-digust that can only be overcome by finding one's new identity and image in Christ. At the root of all these issues is a self-trust that pretends to be wiser than God, and a distrust of God's fatherly provision to care for us at all times.

--

Those with eating disorders simultaneously love themselves too much and hate themselves in the wrong way. There is a proper kind of self-love and self-care that does not detract from loving and caring for others, but provides the model for doing so.

--

Your self-image should not be based on what you see in the mirror, but what you see in Christ.

--

We are allowed to have opinions about what we like to eat and what we think is healthiest. But these are just opinions, to be held lightly and never a grounds for looking down on or despising or dividing from others. When it comes to food we have been set free, so do not enslave yourself -- or seek to enslave others as a kind of "food police."

If you find that your food phobias, or convictions about what it

means to eat healthy, keep you from fellowshiping with the saints then you need to rethink priorities. The church potluck will not kill you; go ahead and eat. Going to someone's home and eating what is served is simply part of being a gracious guest. When we put food above people, we put self above others, and end up dividing the community. This is a great travesty, and truly the work of Satan.

--

So many dieting fads are really just an attack on God's good world and a rejection of his gifts. We blame carbs, fat, sugar, gluten, red meat, etc., each in turn for our health woes. But none of these actually hold the key to health. Health is a gift; entrust your health to God and eat what you want. Don't treat pronouncements about what is healthy or unhealthy as if they were infallible declarations. What "they" are saying is going to change in about 15 minutes. And remember that none of these pronouncements about health are a matter of "pure science;" they are almost always driven by mass marketers and big corporations who are trying to sell you something, and in order to do so they have to create a demand, which they accomplish with fancy labels and clever advertising. And, yes, this is true even of Whole Foods, which is just as much a part of The Establishment as Walmart.

Yes, some food is better than other food, whether judged by taste, aesthetics, or health value. But we should give thanks for all food without becoming too picky about it. In fact, gluttony, one of the "seven deadly sins," actually has more to do with being overly fussy about food than eating too much food. The parsimonious food snob is a glutton much more so than the person who drops into McD's for a BigMac once or twice a week.

--

Our expectations about health need to be realistic. Some of us have a genetic advantage when it comes to staying healthy and living longer. But everyone is going to eventually die. And most of us will battle significant illnesses and bodily breakdown along the way, if we live long enough. Our culture has idolized perpetual youthfulness, but in Scripture, age (and the wisdom that comes from faithful aging)

is a treasure to be prized and a status to be honored. Yes, there are many great things about being young and fit and energetic. God's Word is very honest about the pleasures of youth and the difficulties of old age (Ecclesiastes 12). But God's people should resist the cultural pull towards ageism that discriminates against the elderly and sees getting older as a great tragedy. Instead, God's people should learn how to grow old gracefully. Don't be like Susan Pevensie who spent the first part of her life trying to reach an ideal age, and then the rest of her life trying to stay there. Grow. Mature. Age. Change with the seasons of life. And do so, knowing this is God's will for you. To age into maturity and wisdom is your glory.

--

Real food allergies are medical issue and should be treated as such. These allergies are tragic and ought to be accommodated by the Christian community the same way we would any other medical condition. Sensitivity in this area is a manifestation of Christian love.

--

The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

--

Alexander Schmemmann:

Man is what he eats." With this statement the German materialistic philosopher Feuerbach thought he had put an end to all "idealistic" speculations about human nature. In fact, however, he was expressing, without knowing it, the most religious idea of man. For long before Feuerbach, the same definition of man was given by the Bible. In the biblical story of creation man is presented, first of all, as a hungry being, and the whole world as his food. Second only to the direction to propagate and have dominion over the earth, according to the author of the first chapter of Genesis, is God's instruction to men to eat of the earth: "Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed . . . and every tree, which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. . . ." Man must eat in

order to live; he must take the world into his body and transform it into himself, into flesh and blood. He is indeed that which he eats, and the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet table for man. And this image of the banquet remains, throughout the whole Bible, the central image of life. It is the image of life at its creation and also the image of life at its end and fulfillment: “. . . that you eat and drink at my table in my Kingdom.

James Jordan:

In the nineteenth century there were prominent liberal and sectarian theologians who believed that the sinfulness of man could be curbed through diet and hygiene. John Harvey Kellogg, a Seventh-Day Adventist, invented corn flakes as a meatless breakfast food designed to reduce the sexual drive. Control of “bestial sexual impulses” was linked in the popular imagination, both sectarian and liberal, with a bland diet devoid of alcohol, coffee, tea, tobacco, condiments, and largely devoid of meat. Assumption of this diet would reduce what is today called libido, and this reduction of the “animal” in man would be passed on to one’s children, who would grow up with less “original sin.” Salvation through diet passed into the popular imagination through the writings of liberals like Horace Bushnell, sectarians like Kellogg and Charles Finney, and cultists like Mary Baker Eddy...This was the purpose of Graham flour, developed by Sylvester Graham, and still with us in Graham Crackers. The Graham diet was used at Charles Finney’s Oberlin College to protect students against “vile affections.”