

Eating and Drinking to the Good of the Soul

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26; Psalm 106:1

March 20, 2005

Rev. Greg L. Price

The idea of EATING AND DRINKING is used in a couple different ways in the Bible.

First, EATING AND DRINKING is used in the sense of SUSTAINING LIFE. Without the nourishment that comes from food and the hydration that comes from drink, it would be impossible (apart from a miracle) to keep a person living. For example, we are taught to pray in the Lord's Prayer: "And give us this day our daily bread" Matthew 6:11. Here the eating of bread signifies that which we need here on earth in order to promote both health and life to the glory of God. Thus, EATING AND DRINKING may emphasize that which keeps us alive.

Second, EATING AND DRINKING is used in the sense of ENJOYING LIFE (and usually in fellowship and communion with others). In biblical times (as well as in the present time), it was over good food and drink that people gathered to enjoy one another's company and the many blessings God has given in life. For example, we read in 1 Kings 4:20 that under the prosperous reign of King Solomon: "Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea in multitude, EATING AND DRINKING, AND MAKING MERRY." Here the idea of EATING AND DRINKING was not primarily to signify that which sustains life, but rather that which enjoys God's blessings in life.

The point that Solomon is making in Ecclesiastes 2:24 is that food and drink (as representing all the blessings of this life) are not simply given in order to sustain and to preserve our life, but that God has given these many earthly blessings in order that we may enjoy life as well. But in order to do so, joy in the Lord must always be coupled with joy in the blessings of this life. Once we remove the joy of the Lord from the equation, we will turn the blessings of this life into grief, sorrow, and vanity.

Let us consider our text today from Ecclesiastes 2:24-26. The main points from our text are these: (1) Eating and Drinking to the Good of the Soul (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25); (2) Eating and Drinking to the Blessing or Cursing of Man (Ecclesiastes 2:26).

I. Eating and Drinking to the Good of the Soul (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25).

A. Solomon, up to this point in the Book of Ecclesiastes, has recounted for us how he sought for a lasting joy in a worldly knowledge and wisdom, and even in what he calls madness (Ecclesiastes 1:17). But Solomon only found emptiness and futility. Solomon also looked for an enduring happiness that satisfies the heart by means of laughter, exquisite food and drink, massive building projects, multitudes of servants, vast riches, the best music, and the most beautiful wives and concubines, but all he found was that he hated life (Ecclesiastes 2:17), that he hated all his work (Ecclesiastes 2:18), and that it was all vanity and vexation of spirit to him (Ecclesiastes 2:17). All of Solomon's time has been spent (up to this point) in showing where true joy IS NOT found: It IS NOT found in the things of this life (regardless of what they may be) when it is pursued apart from joy in the Lord. Solomon's argument has been entirely NEGATIVE so far.

B. At this point, Solomon discontinues that NEGATIVE line of argument for a moment in order to show where true joy IS found: It IS found in the creaturely necessities and comforts of this life, only as they are

subservient to a greater end, namely, to enjoy Christ as our first love. Solomon only takes a brief moment to give the POSITIVE side presently, but he will spend more time doing so later on the Book of Ecclesiastes. Jesus Christ, dear ones, is the POSITIVE answer to our despair, our sorrow, our discouragement, our sins, our fears, and He is especially the answer to death and hell.

1. It is important that whatever the issue we may be addressing that we not forget to express the POSITIVE side of an argument as well as the NEGATIVE. For if we are only pointing out what is wrong with this or that, if we are constantly viewed as attacking this or that, we will likely be viewed as unloving, legalistic and pharisaic. More importantly, we provide no sound basis to believe our argument.

2. For example, if the Sabbath is only viewed in a negative fashion detailing all of the things we cannot and should not do, there will be no joy in keeping the Sabbath. Our whole understanding of Sabbath keeping will be largely negative. However, if we promote the benefits of the Sabbath and the many privileges that are ours to do on the Sabbath (such as a day of physical rest; a day devoted to deeds of necessity, mercy, and worship; a whole day to enjoy our God and for Him to enjoy us, to enjoy His ordinances, and to enjoy our brethren), we will not only be motivated to believe and practice Sabbath keeping because of the authority of God, but because of the love of God. The Sabbath will not be a burden, but a joy to us. We will not so much think of the Sabbath in terms of what we CANNOT DO, but rather in terms of what we CAN DO (as directed by God in His Word).

3. How do we come across in our presentation of any topic or subject? What about when there is an offence with your spouse, with a family member, with a brother or sister in Christ? At such times, do you focus only upon what is negative and level your criticism against him/her as if there is nothing to commend or to be thankful for in the life of that brother or sister in Christ? Do people walk away remembering about you that you are extremely critical and negative? Are you careful always to seek to give reasons not only why something should not be done, but also why something should be done? As Christians we should not only condemn error, we should also commend the truth. We should not only use the Law to reveal sin, but also use the Gospel to reveal the mercy and love of God. We should not only confront others with sin when necessary, but we should also give hope and comfort of forgiveness as well. I would submit that our overly critical and negative attitude and speech to our spouse, to our brethren, and to our neighbor reveal a sinful discontentment and thanklessness to Christ for all that He has purchased for us. If we can't wait to get the "goods" on others so that we can rake them over the coals, we only reveal that the joy of the Lord is missing in our lives. Dear ones, we must work more diligently in shaping the way we present our church, present our doctrines and practices, and present ourselves as Christians, so that we do not come across in such a critical, negative fashion. Beloved, the Savior for whom we stand is One in whom to rejoice. The doctrine which we profess and the life which we live must be positively promoted as what is right and best for us if we would enjoy God's wisdom, love, mercy, peace, contentment, and strength.

C. Let us consider then in the words of Solomon what really made the difference to Solomon between hating his work and enjoying his work.

1. Solomon first focuses his remarks upon the OUTWARD MAN when he says, "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink" (Ecclesiastes 2:24a). The eating and drinking that Solomon has in view here is GOOD for a man (Solomon says, "There is nothing better"). This is not an eating and drinking to sinful extremes wherein it is BAD for a man. This is an eating and drinking TO SATISFY THE BODILY NEEDS AND THE COMFORTS OF MAN. Solomon uses the idea of eating and drinking here for any lawful blessing that may be enjoyed here upon the earth. Instead of eating and drinking, he may have said, "There is nothing better for a man, than that he should plant a field, build a house, or raise a family." Whatever the blessing God bestows in this life, it is GOOD that we enjoy it. For, dear ones, God has blessed us richly with all things in this life TO ENJOY (1 Timothy 6:17).

a. Note that the REPENTANT Preacher (Solomon) did not criticize the material things of this life just because he himself had abused them earlier in his life by seeking to find joy and happiness in them apart from love and obedience to Christ. Solomon did not conclude that since he was unable to find a lasting joy and satisfaction in his work or pleasure that there must be something sinful in the work or pleasure of this life. No, Solomon concluded the sin was in HIMSELF. HE was the sinner who made family, work, pleasures, and riches HIS god. HE was the one who was serving the creature rather than the Creator. That was HIS own sin, for which HE needed to repent and to seek the merciful forgiveness of God (as do we all).

b. There have always been those who were ready to condemn the enjoyment of some material object as sinful. You will recall that the Pharisees condemned the Disciples of Christ for not purifying their hands by means of an outward ritual concocted by the tradition of the elders, but one that was never required by God's Law. The Lord Jesus stated ever so clearly that it was not that which man took into his body that made him sinful, but that which proceeded from his heart by way of evil thoughts and wicked desires that defiled a man (Mark 7:14-23). In other words, it is not money, sexual intimacy, guns, food and drink, jobs, houses, cars, family and friends that are sinful in themselves. What is sinful is how we use them and to what end we use them. Do we use them within the lawful boundaries God has stated in His Word (for example, sexual intimacy only within the bounds of a lawful marriage)? Do we use them and enjoy them to the glory of God and to the good of ourselves and others?

c. Dear ones, Solomon does not condemn the things of this life as sinful in themselves, but rather condemns his EXCESSIVE LOVE of the things in this life as sinful (just as the Apostle John says in 1 John 2:15-16). It is certainly true that things which have been sinfully abused will no doubt need to be cautiously and prayerfully used in order to avoid further abuse. In some cases, the thing abused may best be abstained from altogether, such as wine for one who is addicted to it (at least until there is evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in the form of self-control). But even in such cases, it is not the material object itself that is sinful. It is WE who are sinful. It is WE who must learn by God's grace to use that material object according to God's Word and to the glory of God. Otherwise, we condemn God Himself who created that material object or gives that earthly blessing.

d. So Solomon first declares that eating and drinking (not only to our necessity, but to our comfort and enjoyment) is GOOD. In fact, when properly qualified (as Solomon is about to do in the second part of this verse), there is "NOTHING BETTER" than to eat and drink. Are you finding joy and satisfaction in your eating and drinking, in your lawful work and pleasures, in your family and friends, and in the external ordinances and sacraments of the Lord Jesus Christ? God intends that you find that satisfaction and joy in all of these earthly blessings. Even if you only believe you are receiving the "crumbs" from the Table rather than the "whole meal", you can still learn (by God's grace) to be thankful for the "crumbs" and to rejoice in every sip of water that touches your lips. The smallest meal will then be turned into the most exquisite feast because of a thankful and rejoicing heart for all of God's goodness to you.

2. Solomon secondly focuses on the INWARD MAN when he writes: "And that he should make his SOUL enjoy good in his labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:24b).

a. Not only is man to eat and drink physically the blessings of God, but Solomon qualifies the eating and drinking that is in view here with "that he should make his SOUL enjoy good in his labor." There cannot be a holy joy found in simply eating and drinking, unless a person's SOUL also enjoys that which is good. For joy is not found primarily in the outward man, but in the inward man. If the inward man is ignored and neglected, no amount of eating and drinking is going to satisfy the hungering and thirsting of a man's soul.

b. Notice that Solomon says that "he should make his soul enjoy GOOD." What is the GOOD that a man's soul is to enjoy? It is the GOODNESS of God that a man's soul is to supremely enjoy.

(1) The GOODNESS of God is first an attribute of God's nature. An "attribute" of God is who God is. GOODNESS describes who God is: He is GOOD (Psalm 106:1; Psalm 107:1). He is GOOD not only for what He does, but for WHO He is. God is infinitely GOOD in Himself. In a broad sense the GOODNESS of God refers to His absolute perfection in every way. There is no lacking in any way in our God whether it be in His love, grace, and mercy, or whether it be in His holiness, justice, and righteousness. Therefore, everything that happens in your life and mine, in heaven and upon earth, must be done for His glory and not for our glory, for only He is truly GOOD. It is not boastful or proud or arrogant for God to do whatever He does for His own glory. To the contrary, if God did that which was NOT for His own glory, it would not be GOOD, but rather evil (for all GOODNESS proceeds from Him). But, dear ones, if we do that which is for our own glory rather than for God's, it must be evil (for all GOODNESS is derived from Him). You and I are not the highest GOOD. God is the highest and supreme GOOD. There is nothing that is better or more excellent than God. Thus, if we would grow in our joy and satisfaction, we must grow in our hungering and thirsting for Him who is infinitely GOOD. We must grow in enjoying Him who is supremely GOOD. We must see God is the fount of all GOODNESS. We must desire to drink out of that fount every day and throughout the day. If we don't begin there, how can we possibly enjoy anything that is GOOD here on earth?

(2) Secondly, God is not only GOOD for who He is, but also for WHAT He does. This aspect emphasizes the GENEROSITY of God to His creatures. God's GOODNESS is undeserved by His creatures. God was GOOD (generous) to create all things, and especially to create man. God is GOOD (generous) to preserve and provide for His creation (including man). God is especially GOOD (generous) to rescue fallen sinners from the wrath and condemnation which they so justly deserve and to give them every heavenly and earthly blessing in Christ Jesus. He didn't have to do so. He didn't do so to fill up something that was lacking in Himself (or a need that He had). He did so in order to glorify His GOODNESS. Thus, when we grumble and complain that all we have to eat is this same old "manna", we are attacking the GOODNESS of God who can only do to us (His beloved children through faith in Christ) that which is GOOD, because He is GOOD. When we fall into the sin of discontentment, so that where we live, or the temperatures outside, or the people we have to work with, or the criticism we face from others, or the disobedience of our children so regulate our whole disposition that we cannot enjoy the Lord in the midst of them, we have surely forgotten, ignored, or neglected the GOODNESS of God and His GOODNESS to us. Dear ones, I challenge you this week to meditate and reflect upon the glory of God's GOODNESS, to grow in your understanding of God's GOODNESS, to enjoy God's GOODNESS, and to see if your joy and contentment in life does not proportionately grow as well. Thus, when Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 2:24b, that there is nothing better than that "he should make his soul to enjoy good in his labor," he is saying (in effect) that in order to enjoy our physical eating and drinking, we must enjoy our spiritual eating and drinking of the GOODNESS of God in all that we do.

D. The repentant Preacher (Solomon) declares next, that when a man, woman, or child is able to truly enjoy his/her physical eating and drinking and is able to truly enjoy his/her spiritual eating and drinking, such an enjoyment does not come from that man, woman, or child, but rather, "it is from the hand of God" (Ecclesiastes 2:24c). Similarly Paul said in the context of reaping the harvest from the Gospel, "I have planted, Apollos watered; but GOD GAVE THE INCREASE" (1 Corinthians 3:6). Dear ones, it is easy for all of us to forget who it is that gives the increase to all that we accomplish in this life. The human ego says, "I worked to accomplish this or that, so I should receive the applause of men for the increase." However, let us not forget, dear ones, that God has appointed means (such as work in order to reach certain goals) not that we might rob Him of His glory in blessing us, but that we might demonstrate our faith, love, and obedience in performing that which He has appointed. Success, accomplishments, work, pleasure, family, and friends are not all about us. They are all about our GOOD GOD. And therein is joy to be found.

E. Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 2:25, that no one was better able to eat or drink and to enjoy more blessings in this world than he. He had been blessed with so much more than the average person. The repentant Solomon had learned that God had given him more in this life, not in order that Solomon might seek his joy and happiness in them, but in order to provide abundant opportunity to see the hand of a GOOD GOD in all that he possessed.

II. Eating and Drinking to the Blessing or Cursing of Man (Ecclesiastes 2:26).

A. Solomon concludes this section by observing that God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to the one who is GOOD in His sight, and gives travail to the one who is a SINNER, separated from Him. Not only does the SINNER who is separated from God not find the joy for which he seeks, but he finds sorrow and travail (without peace) in his/her labor. Moreover, all of the labor which the SINNER performs, Solomon says, God will eventually give to the one who is GOOD in His sight. For the SINNER, who is separated from the Lord Jesus Christ, this is an endless striving and restlessness; it is emptiness and gnawing at the soul of a man.

B. Who is the GOOD man and who is the SINNER?

1. The GOOD man is not one who is GOOD in himself, but one who has found GOODNESS in Jesus Christ. He is one who has embraced the GOOD news of Christ, and eats and drinks of that GOOD news every day as he worships and praises the God of his salvation. The GOOD man, interestingly, sees himself by nature as NOT GOOD, and sees any GOODNESS in him as flowing only from the GOODNESS of a GOOD God. The GOOD man hungers and thirsts for God to reveal His GOODNESS through him in his thoughts, desires, aspirations, words, religion, works and pleasures. The GOOD man simply desires to be a mirror to the world in reflecting the GOODNESS of God.

2. The SINNER, on the other hand, is one who sees himself as essentially GOOD. He does not find his GOODNESS in the righteousness of Christ, but in his own righteousness. Such a one (while in that state) will never find that everlasting joy, for the joy of a GOOD God is nonexistent in his life. Just as the Israelites plundered the wealth of the Egyptians when they left Egypt, so will the GOOD man plunder the wealth of the SINNER. For that wealth will eventually fall (by God's providence) into the hands of the GOOD man, who will use it to glorify and to enjoy the God who has given it to him (Matthew 5:5).

3. Dear ones, blessing and cursing are set before you today. If you would learn to enjoy the blessings of God, find your joy in the fount of all GOODNESS, even in our infinitely generous and gracious God. If you would rather choose to be afflicted with the curses of God, continue to look for joy in the GOODNESS of man, or in the GOODNESS of work, or in the GOODNESS of pleasure (apart from faith in and love for Jesus Christ). Life and death is set before you today: choose life and joy in Jesus Christ.

Copyright 2005 Greg L. Price.