

On Devotion to the Word of God: Three Parables

Special Topical Lesson

I. Overview of This Class

- a. This lesson is based on a similar lesson I gave recently, *Sacred Writings: A Meal that Makes You Hungrier*, given on the 'Strength to Strength' website platform on 5/20/2023. That lesson can be viewed on YouTube.
- b. In this lesson, I will be presenting the material in the form of three illustrations or *parables*.
 - i. The first parable is one that I made up.
 - ii. The other two examples are based on actual stories taken from the Old Testament.
- c. The objective of this particular message is to convict and inspire those who listen, to deepen their personal devotion to reading and studying the Word of God, the Scriptures.
 - i. My hope is that this lesson will be easy to understand and very practical.

II. Parable No. 1: Parable of Whole Wheat Flour vs. Enriched White Flour

- a. As a child growing up, in our home we often had 'Wonder Bread', a very light, spongy white bread that was good for making sandwiches.
- b. However, in my college years, living in a health-conscious community where we did our own cooking for the group, I learned how to bake bread the old-fashioned way. We started by taking the brown whole wheat grain (berries), and stone-grinding it by hand to produce whole wheat flour.
 - i. I learned that real, whole-wheat flour has a light brown color. The whole wheat berries contain germ (inner seed part), bran (outer coating with fiber), as well as a white, starchy endosperm part.
 - ii. Kept dry, out of sun and heat, and away from varmints, whole wheat berries have a long shelf life, with the inner parts protected by the outer layer of bran.
 1. When the grain is milled and the bran is broken, however, whole wheat flour starts to degrade and rapidly loses nutritional value.
- c. A brief history of the evolution of wheat flour.

- i. Although white flour was known in ancient times, particularly in the wealthy classes, most wheat flour consisted of all the elements of wheat berries, which were stone-ground prior to baking.
- ii. However, in the 1870s-1890s, milling with large-scale steel or ceramic rollers became popular. That enabled separation of the germ and bran from the 'white' part. This made 'white flour' economical.
 1. 'Advantages' of white flour over whole wheat included:
 - a. It produces lighter, higher-rising breads, cakes and pastries.
 - b. More attractive, whiter color (later further enhanced by bleaching) and more delicate taste.
 - c. Longer shelf life; mass production and storage leading to lower cost for flour.
 2. Disadvantages:
 - a. Most of the nutrient value, fiber, trace minerals, and vitamins (especially B vitamins) were removed through the new milling process.
 - b. Diseases (beriberi, pellagra, anemia) increased due to the loss of critical nutritional components. The health impacts were not widely recognized until starting in the 1910s.
 - c. Over time, there was an attempt to partially correct this by '*enriching*' the refined white flour. This was done by adding back a few of the many vitamins and minerals that had been lost through milling.
 - d. Since then, studies have raised awareness of the impact of this switch to refined white flour on public health, contributing to increases in obesity, cancers, diabetes, heart disease, etc.
 3. The problem: people didn't realize how much we needed all the trace vitamins, minerals and fiber for our health. By one estimate, 40 of 44 key minerals and vitamins are present in whole wheat, but most of that is lost through the modern milling process. However, for the most part, the nutrients lost are not recovered through the artificial enriching process. God designed whole grains with things in there that we need, *that most people did not even realize*.

iii. Lesson for us, following this allegory:

1. We need the 'whole Bible', rather than a refined version of the Scriptures that may be more easily digestible in the short term.
 - a. The New Testament writers point Christians back to the importance of the Old Testament.
 - i. "...and that *from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation* through faith which is in Christ Jesus. *All Scripture* is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (**2 Timothy 3:15–17**, NKJV)
 - ii. "For *whatever things were written before were written for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." (**Romans 15:4**, NKJV)
 - b. Consider the legacy of James A. Harding (1848-1922), a Restoration Movement leader who was a famous preacher and teacher among the Churches of Christ in the late 19th and early 20th century. His life is an inspiration and upward call to me.
 - i. When Harding died, R.H. Boll eulogized his mentor as "one who set more people to reading the Bible than any other preacher; and he infused his own love and appreciation for the Word into those who came under his sway". Harding encouraged daily reading of three and a third chapters of the Bible as a spiritual discipline, in order to read the entire Bible in one year.
 - ii. He formed Bible reading classes wherever he went as an itinerant evangelist and collected 'Bible reading cards' that detailed commitments and progress. He believed that "the chief duty of the teacher in the Church (is) to lead people to the daily, diligent, prayerful study of the Word," and he devoted more time and energy to that one point than to any other.

- iii. Harding saw the goal of daily Bible reading as relational, exposing us to the mind of God in Scripture so that we can be shaped into the image of Christ. He said that since “God is the author of the Bible, we should read it that we may know him”. Harding practiced what he preached. In 1914 he said that he had read the Old Testament through sixty times, and the New Testament one hundred and thirty times.
 1. (Source: *Kingdom Come*, Hicks J.M. & Valentine, B., Leafwood Publishers, Abilene, TX, pp. 80-82)
- c. In a large church I was in, the leaders periodically would try to come up with a program of teaching for the year.
 - i. Generally, the preaching and teaching relied heavily on 3-point topical lessons.
 1. The topics hit would reflect what the church leaders believed were the most important for the members and visitors.
 - ii. On relatively rare occasions, an Old Testament book or an Old Testament survey class would be taught.
 - iii. When asked in the teachers’ group what we should emphasize, my answer usually was: Let’s teach the *entire Bible*. Let us teach it all to the church, even if it takes us a few years to do so.
 1. The church leaders and other teachers typically dismissed my suggestion as *highly impractical*.
2. I believe we need to teach the entire Bible, all the Scriptures, to the church if we are striving to have a healthy church.
 - a. There are things buried in books of the Bible that some might consider ‘obscure’ that will help meet needs we do not even know that we have!
3. Let us not settle for some “fluffier, enriched” version that is limited to the gospels and psalms, or to just the New

Testament. We need it all; and the church will suffer strange spiritual illnesses from malnutrition without it.

III. Parable No. 2: Story of the Manna in the Wilderness

a. Read **Exodus 16:1-5**.

- i. God would feed them in the Wilderness with this unusual “bread from heaven”.
- ii. God also would use this means of feeding them as a test, to see if they would obey His instructions regarding how and when they gathered the manna.

b. Read **Exodus 16:11-21**.

- i. They had to gather it in the morning before the sun became hot and the manna melted away.
- ii. The people would eat this manna daily while they were in the Wilderness.
- iii. They were forbidden to store it up. They had to gather manna new every day (except they could get two days’ worth on Friday, the day prior to the Sabbath).

c. Read **Exodus 16:22-30**.

- i. The manna was versatile; they could bake or boil it.
- ii. It did not appear on the Sabbath. It appeared for six days, but not on the seventh, in a cycle that lasted throughout their 40 years in the Wilderness (clearly not a natural phenomenon, but a true miracle).

d. Read **Exodus 16:31-35**.

- i. It appeared as white flakes on the ground.
- ii. The manna tasted like wafers made with honey (sweet/pleasant).
- iii. Aaron to keep a golden pot of the manna for future generations by the ark as a reminder.
- iv. It sustained them for the entire 40-year journey in the Wilderness, until they crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land (**Joshua 5:11-12**).

1. Recall that the time in the Wilderness is a ‘type’ or map of the Christian life. It represents the time from escaping slavery and

being 'baptized' all the way until entering the Promised Land
(**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**).

2. This sustained them during their "time of testing".

e. Read **Numbers 11:4-10**.

- i. "Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: 'Who will give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!' Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its color like the color of bdellium. The people went about and gathered it, ground it on millstones or beat it in the mortar, cooked it in pans, and made cakes of it; and its taste was like the taste of pastry prepared with oil. And when the dew fell on the camp in the night, the manna fell on it. Then Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, everyone at the door of his tent; and the anger of the LORD was greatly aroused; Moses also was displeased." (**Numbers 11:4-10**, NKJV)
- ii. Early in the journey, the "mixed multitude" (Egyptians who departed Egypt with the Israelites) complained about the food and influenced the Israelites to complain as well. This angered the Lord.

f. Read **Numbers 21:5**

- i. Near the end of the 40-year journey, the people again complain about the manna. They are bored and miss the variety of food that had been available in Egypt.
- ii. "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.'"
(**Numbers 21:5**, NKJV)

g. Read **Deuteronomy 8:2-3**.

- i. "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. 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." (**Deuteronomy 8:2-3**, NKJV)

- ii. When Jesus was being tempted in the Wilderness, He quoted this passage back to Satan.
 - 1. He showed us the best way to respond in the face of temptation: hitting back with the Word of God.
- h. Application for us:
 - i. We need to feed on this food from God every day.
 - 1. Many people today complain that they are 'too busy' to be able to spend time in the Word of God every day.
 - a. However, I ask them, "Did you have time to eat *physical food* today?"
 - b. If you always manage to find the time to feed your physical body, what about feeding your spirit? Isn't that even *more important*?
 - ii. It was sweet to the taste.
 - 1. That reminds me of what it says in **Psalm 119:103**, where the writer says that the Word of God is, to him, "sweeter than honey".
 - iii. Some got bored with the manna and became ungrateful, wanting more variety and excitement. They looked back longingly to 'the food of Egypt'.
 - 1. Similarly, many Christians today can tend to grow weary of the Scriptures. They become 'bored' with that and look back longingly on the worldly entertainment they enjoyed in the past: their iPhone, the internet, sports, movies and other stimulation offered by the world.
 - iv. They needed to gather it *in the morning*.
 - 1. Note that you could boil or bake it in fire; however, the *rays of the sun* would melt it.
 - a. Had to gather it before the time when "the sun became hot, and it melted". (**Exodus 16:21**)
 - 2. **Wisdom of Solomon 16:20-29** discusses the significance of the manna given to the Israelites in the Wilderness. There, it says that the instructions regarding gathering the manna in the morning were given to *teach us to rise early* to give thanks to God!

- a. **Wisdom of Solomon** is included in the Old Testament canon of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is among the books that are referred to as 'the Apocrypha' or 'the Deuterocanonical Books'. These books were in the original King James Version, but were removed after about 250 years, around the late 1800s or early 1900s. For more on these books, and the case for including them in Scripture, see a message by David Bercot, '*Sacred Writings: The Deuterocanonicals, Your Friend or Foe?*' (1/28/2023) posted on the *Strength to Strength* website.
- b. There is no *requirement* that we have time in the Scriptures in the morning.
 - i. Some people simply are not 'morning people', and a time later in the day works better for them.
 - ii. However, for most of us, it seems that establishing a time first thing in the morning to be in the Word of God works the best.
- c. We also have the example of David's devotional life, praying in the morning. He wrote:
 - i. "My voice You shall hear in the morning, O LORD; In the morning I will direct it to You, And I will look up." (**Psalm 5:3**, NKJV)

i. **Parable No. 3: Clean vs. Unclean Animals**

i. Read **Leviticus 11:1-8**.

1. Since birds, reptiles, sea creatures and insects are dealt with later, I assume this passage covers the *land-based mammals*.
2. The clean must meet ***BOTH*** of the following two criteria:
 - a. Chews the cud, and
 - b. Has split (cloven) hooves.

ii. About chewing the cud.

1. Grasses are plentiful over much of the earth, but for most animals, it is too difficult to extract all the nutrients they need from eating only grasses.
2. A cow is designed by God to eat and properly digest *grass*. A cow's stomach has four compartments. That allows them to eat

grass, store it in one of their stomach compartments for a period of time, then regurgitate it (coughing it up) to chew it again and again to extract more of the nutrients later.

iii. About split hooves.

1. Horses and camels have a single *hoof* (a single hard, bone-like structure at the bottom of each leg).
2. Pigs, sheep and goats have split hooves (bisected, with left and right halves) that make them more sure-footed on rocky or uneven terrain.
3. Most mammals (dogs, cats, foxes, bears, people, etc.) have no hooves at all. They may have paws instead.

iv. One out of two is *NOT GOOD ENOUGH!*

1. Horses, camels and rabbits chew the cud, but do not have split hooves. Therefore, they are unclean.
2. Pigs have split hooves but do not chew the cud. Therefore, they are unclean.
3. Animals that *BOTH* chew the cud and have split hooves, and therefore are 'clean', include sheep, goats, deer and cows (cattle).

v. 'Unclean' animals could not be eaten by the Jews, nor could they touch their dead carcasses.

1. Today we are no longer bound by the Law of Moses, including these dietary requirements. As Paul explains in **Colossians 2:14**, they were "nailed to the cross".
 - a. However, Paul explains that the things of the Law were a "shadow of things to come" (**Colossians 2:17**).
 - b. For example, he says that (Jewish) circumcision foreshadowed (Christian) baptism.

vi. Recall that in many places in Scripture, God uses *animals* to communicate things about humans. Some examples:

1. "Do not muzzle an *ox* while it is treading out the grain." (**Deuteronomy 25:4**; repeated in **1 Corinthians 9:9** and **1 Timothy 5:18**)
2. "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the *little dogs*." (**Matthew 15:26**)

3. "Go to the *ant*, you sluggard!" (**Proverbs 6:6**)
 4. "Go tell that *fox* (referring to King Herod) ..." (**Luke 13:32**)
 5. "... I send you out as *sheep* in the midst of *wolves*. Therefore be wise as *serpents* and harmless as *doves*." (**Matthew 10:16**)
 6. "You shall not plow with an *ox* and a *donkey together*."
(**Deuteronomy 22:10**; likely the passage in mind behind the admonition of **2 Corinthians 6:14** to not be "unequally yoked with unbelievers.")
 7. As "... 'a dog returns to his own vomit,' and, 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.'" (**2 Peter 2:22**)
- vii. **Question:** Could the Lord be trying to communicate something to us in the distinction between clean and unclean animals? Let us take another look.
1. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul, writing c. 180 AD (note that as a child, he had learned from Polycarp, who in turn had learned from the apostle John):
 - a. "Now the law has *figuratively* predicted all these, delineating man by the [various] animals: whatsoever of these, says [the Scripture], have a double hoof and ruminates, it proclaims as clean; but whatsoever of them do not possess one or other of these [properties], it sets aside by themselves as unclean.
 - b. "Who then are the clean? Those who make their way by faith steadily towards *the Father and the Son*; for this is denoted by the steadiness of those which *divide the hoof*; and they meditate day and night upon the words of God, that they may be adorned with good works: for this is the meaning of the ruminants.
 - c. "The unclean, however, are those which do neither divide the hoof nor ruminates; that is, those persons who have neither faith in God, nor do meditate on His words: and such is the abomination of the Gentiles. But as to those animals which do indeed chew the cud, but have not the double hoof, and are themselves unclean, we have in them a figurative description of the Jews, who certainly have the words of God in their mouth, but who do not fix their rooted steadfastness in the Father and in the Son; wherefore they are an unstable generation.

- d. “For those animals which have the hoof all in one piece easily slip; but those which have it divided are more sure-footed, their cleft hoofs succeeding each other as they advance, and the one hoof supporting the other. In like manner, too, those are unclean which have the double hoof but do not ruminate: this is plainly an indication of all heretics, and of those who do not meditate on the words of God, neither are adorned with works of righteousness; to whom also the Lord says, ‘Why call ye Me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say to you?’
- e. “For men of this stamp do indeed say that they believe in the Father and the Son, but they never meditate as they should upon the things of God, neither are they adorned with works of righteousness; but, as I have already observed, they have adopted the lives of swine and of dogs, giving themselves over to filthiness, to gluttony, and recklessness of all sorts.”
- i. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, chapter 8; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 534)
 - ii. Irenaeus saw the reference to ‘clean’ animals *chewing the cud* as referring to those who *meditate on the Word of God day and night*, as it says at the beginning of **Psalm 1**.
 1. “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.” (**Psalm 1:1-3**, NKJV)
 - iii. Irenaeus saw the animals with the split hooves (more sure-footed than animals with single, undivided hooves) as foreshadowing those who followed *both* the Father and the Son. That is unlike the Jews, who (even though they meditate on the Scriptures) believe in the Father *but reject the Son*.

1. "... He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has *both the Father and the Son.*" (**2 John 9**, NKJV)
2. For similar insights from other early other Christian writers regarding the significance of the **Leviticus 11** distinction between clean and unclean animals, see also:
 - a. Clement of Alexandria, in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, pp. 289, 456 and 555-556.
 - b. Novatian, in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 647.
- viii. Conclusions from early Christian insights into this passage.
 1. The Law of Moses, while no longer binding on us, foreshadowed important things to come. We now have the realities.
 2. God many times uses animals in Scripture to convey important spiritual lessons to us.
 3. Early Christian writers saw in the instructions regarding 'clean' vs. 'unclean' animals, an important lesson for us.
 - a. To be 'clean', we must be like the animals that chew the cud (sheep, goats, cows).
 - b. Don't be like the pig, who is not discriminating and *devours anything* (including garbage).
 - c. The ruminants (animals who chew the cud) *eat only the good, pure grass*. However, after eating it, they need to regurgitate it and chew on it throughout the day, to get all of the nutrients out of it.
 - d. Likewise, we must devour the Word of God (not the tasty garbage food of the world) and then meditate on it all day long, to extract all the spiritual wisdom from it!

IV. Concluding Thoughts from These Three Parables

- a. From the parable of the whole grain:
 - i. If we want to be healthy, we need the "whole grain" of all the Scriptures.
 - ii. In our churches nor in our personal devotions, don't settle with studying only parts of the Bible. Read and study it all, including the Old Testament.

- b. From the story of the manna in the Wilderness:
 - i. The word of God is our spiritual food. We need it every day to sustain us on our journey through the Wilderness of this life, if we want to make it to the Promised Land.
 - ii. **For most of us, morning is the best time to gather this “spiritual bread from heaven”.**
- c. From the story of the clean vs. unclean animals:
 - i. After feeding on the Word of God, we need to be ruminating (meditating) on it throughout the day and night, to get all of the spiritual benefits out of it.
 - ii. This involves time and effort, and will be greatly rewarded!