

True Religion, a Matter of Taste

Psalm 34:8

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!
Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”

[This sermon was delivered before a celebration of the Lord's Supper.]

1. Taste and See

Now you may always have felt a certain confidence that taste held a place of relative importance in the universe. From haberdashery to home decor, you felt comfortable that taste should reign supreme and, doubtless, you felt that your taste was supremely correct. But you are far less certain that taste should be supreme in matters of religion.

But now consider what the Bible says about taste. This matter of tasting and seeing that the Lord is good practically defines what a Christian is, and is one of the ongoing blessings of being a Christian.

A. To taste is to know truly what is objectively real. Of course, there are many who would like to say that religion is MERELY a matter of taste; it is all subjective, only about personal preferences for who is god to me, and what shall my truth be.

But when the Bible talks about taste in this sense it is not talking about something subjective, but something objective, something really out there to be tested, something verifiable. The taste of something really resides in the object as an inherent property. You put it on your tongue, and you experience REALITY by your sense of taste; it is why we can have cook books that tell us to use certain ingredients that have known, objectively real flavors, tastes. Tasting is a matter of experiencing REALITY. Then it is your response that provides the subjective element: “Yuck. Yum.”

One Hebrew dictionary offers this definition of the verb “taste” used in our text: “the primary meaning of the root is ‘to try, or to evaluate, with the tongue, normally with a view to consumption if the flavor is suitable.’”

In this sense, we are to “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Not only that he does good, but that he himself is good. It is his known, objective flavor, his character. He, in himself, really has certain qualities that may be truly known by humans. It is not a matter of guessing what kind of a God he is or shaping him according to our fancy. It is a matter of knowing him truly and loving what we know of him or rejecting him. This is biblical religion; no more guessing, inventing, no more pulling the wool over our own eyes pretending we can't plainly discern certain things about the God who made us and oversees all our days.

B. To taste is to know immediately by personal experience. We are to taste and see that the Lord is good. To taste is not only to hear about, read about, to have recommended, or to receive a second-hand description. When you read a cake recipe or even look at a menu, and then see with your eyes the glorious, full-color photo of the Three-story, Quadruple-fudge, Ice Cream Parfait Paradise—your mouth may water—but you still have not tasted it. To taste is not just being persuaded or holding certain convictions that something would be flavorful. Taste is the exploding sensation of pleasure that comes from direct contact. Taste is immediate knowledge coming from personal experience.

Now in English when we talk about tasting, we think it means we eat just a little. You put just a little on your tongue and you taste. But the biblical emphasis is not the amount eaten, but experiencing what is eaten. In his parable about a banquet and the response of those who were invited, our Lord said, “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” (Luk.14:24). Not that the Master won't allow them to have a little tiny sample, but that they won't participate in, share in, experience fully, partake of deeply. In Heb.2:9 the same idea is conveyed when it relates how Christ experienced “...the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for

everyone.” That Christ tasted death does not mean that he just had a little tiny sample, but that he knew immediately by personal experience. He personally participated so fully and deeply in our death that he made it his own. Christ tasted death so that we could taste and see that God is good. Another passage in Hebrews indicates how we Christians have already personally experienced (in part) the blessings of the age to come: “...and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come...” (Heb.6:5). Tasting (the heavenly gift) is here correlated with sharing in (the Holy Spirit) by personal experience.

Christianity is a matter of knowing God through Jesus Christ, of personally experiencing him and sharing in his eternal life, not just hearing about him, or agreeing with certain propositions about him. This is to taste the goodness of God. Not simply to suck on a morsel or crumb, but to know him finally as deeply as we have been known, face to face.

C. To taste is to know deeply what goes beyond words. This important aspect of tasting follows directly on the previous. You cannot begin to put into words the immediate, personal taste of Caesar salad, wine, steak, rainbow sherbet. Far less can you entirely encapsulate in words your personal relationship and tasting of the Lord. Taste is a participation that goes beyond words.

Many passages of the Bible express this. Paul prays that the Ephesian Christians, “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph.3:18). Paul promises the Philippians, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in X Jesus” (Phil.4:7). The love of Christ? The peace of God? This is the taste of the goodness of the Lord.

Likewise, it has been the testimony of the saints through all the ages that to taste and see that the Lord is good is an immediate apprehension of God himself, an experience that is not irrational or non-intellectual, but that goes infinitely beyond the zenith of our intellects or our verbal ability to describe. Charles Wesley wishes for *A Thousand Tongues to Sing* about his taste of the goodness of the Lord. Francis Scott Key confesses in *Lord, With Glowing Heart I'd Praise Thee*, “Lord, this bosom’s ardent feeling vainly would my lips express... and since words can never measure, let my life show forth thy praise.” Matthew Bridges urges us to *Crown Him With Many Crowns*, while we remember that he is “ineffably sublime”—possessing an awesome majesty beyond the ability of words to describe.

One Christian said long, long ago, in trying to answer what is this tasting of the goodness of the Lord, “I know if I am not asked.”

Herein lies a warning for all. If you can entirely and conveniently summarize your Christianity in words, you are probably not yet a Christian. If the words of the Apostles’ Creed, for instance, completely circumscribe your Christian life, yours is a false faith and a vain hope. Not that the Creed is wrong, but if you can deposit your entire faith without any remainder of incalculable love, inexpressible yearning, or incommunicable joy, in a collection of words, a network of words—however fine and true they may be—you have never tasted the goodness of the Lord.

Yes, words must form the skeleton of your faith, propositional truths (doctrines) may be the bones of it. But what is the muscle that contracts and flexes and sets your whole religious life in careening motion, what the heart that beats, what the blood that pulses, what the sight that guides, what the taste that compels, and what the mysterious inward spark that animates the whole? It can never be separated or dissociated from this pervasive, perpetual taste of the goodness of the Lord. It is the felt participation of the believing soul in the life of God; without it, there can be little hope that an individual has received this life into his soul.

2. Invitation to a Taste Test

We may say that this taste text invites us to a taste test.

Do you have this true, objective, real, immediate, personal, experiential, inexpressibly deep appreciation and taste for the Lord?

And if you know not how to answer this, where will you first find the goodness of the Lord that you might make trial of it, to taste and see, to verify all that I have said? I would first take you to the cross where Jesus died.

“To the cross,” you exclaim? “A horrid place for a picnic!” But the Bible has prepared us to find the best things unexpectedly in the worst places. Remember that salvation was pictured in the history of Samson, when he scraped honey from the rotting and dead carcass of the lion. “Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet” (Jud.14:14).

Consider how Paul put this taste test in Gal.3:1. When the Galatian Christians had begun to lose the taste of the goodness of the Lord, the astonished Paul exclaimed, “You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?” Once their thoughts of Jesus dying on the cross had filled them with sheer delight and joy, to consider the Savior of the world testifying of his love to them on the cross had been sweeter than honey. But now, as if by a satanic bewitchment, Christ crucified had come to seem bland, lacking, insipid. As with sicknesses in the physical realm, this soul malady that had come upon them had rendered their spiritual taste buds dull to the incomparably sweet taste of God’s love in Christ.

Here, then, is the taste test in its purest form. How does the crucified One taste to you? Is it all despicable folly and miserable weakness? Or is it simply flavorless, a banquet of wax fruits that entices you not at all? Or is it divine love sweeter than honey, the savor of a feast of God’s grace, a table spread in the presence of your enemies (Psa.23:5), more sustaining, bracing, enlivening, uplifting, refreshing than any other dish that ever graced any other buffet?

If you do not put your lips to the wounds of that sinless Savior and taste there, in fullest measure, the love of Christ and the peace of God, there is no hope for you. If you do not find a flavor suitable to your needs in Christ crucified, and if you do not instantly wish to consume and participate forever in the love of that crucified One, you have never tasted. Your senses slumber under the pall of death. Ask God to change your taste so that you savor this strange cuisine, or you remain lost.

Here, too, is a further part of this worthy test. See how this psalm is a psalm of thanksgiving, of exuberant gratitude from David to the Lord who has saved him from his enemies? Once you have tasted the goodness and salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ, you can shut your mouth toward neither God nor your neighbor.

The high praises of God your Savior are continually on your tongue as you sing the new song that only the redeemed can learn. You are continually praising and thanking God; it is the overflow of the rivers of living water pouring from your innermost being which Jesus promised (Jh.7:38).

Nor can you help but desire that others should taste what you have known. You become a real pest to those who have not yet tasted. It is your continual prayer that people everywhere will share in this taste of the Lord’s goodness, lift up the cup of salvation, drink it down. The Lord’s command that you should seek everywhere to spread his gospel (Mat.28:18-20, Col.4:5-6) is echoed by an inward compliance and urgency to do this very thing, arising from your regenerated heart, so that you know that what the Scriptures promise of the child of God is true in you—“I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Heb.8:10).

This is a touchstone of biblical Christianity. Is this you?

3. Admonition to Cleanse Your Palate

Perhaps you can say, "Oh, yes, long ago I tasted and saw; years ago I decided for Jesus." But Jesus warned that even salt may lose its saltiness. You may lose the flavor, the haunting savor of the Lord.

How? In this world there are many feasts spread, many flavors vying. Perhaps you've been sampling them, dining at other feasts, eating at the table of demons (1Cor.10:21). It has ruined your taste for what is best and life-giving.

The lurking danger in such a condition is clearly laid out in Heb.6:4-6, "For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then fall away..."

This text preached and this table spread before us (as we prepare to eat of the Lord's Supper in a few moments) constitute a call to cleanse your palate. You know, when you are tasting the finest and best things, you eat something to clear your palate, to strip away all lesser flavors that adulterate that which is most to be desired, so that you may accurately appraise just how precious it really is. Cleanse your palate! Turn, repent of your sins, return to the Lord. Determine here to reject worldliness in all its flavors and to cling to the Lord. Then you shall again taste vibrantly and see clearly the Lord's goodness.

There is a table set here. The very scarcity of its menu (only two items!) says that you have forsaken the feast of this world and chosen that of the age to come.

Unbelievers say, "That is a very coarse meal you Christians eat." Christians respond, "But in it I taste and see that the Lord is good. In it Christ is publicly portrayed as crucified and I dine on his love."

Unbelievers say, "It has tiny portions; you must go away hungry! Come to dine at our table where we always super-size it!" Christians respond, "This meal, properly eaten, does not send you away just as hungry as when you came. No, no. Its design is to send you away more hungry because in it we taste and see that the Lord is good. It works in us an appetite for those things that lie beyond the edge of the history of this world, when in full and to eternity we shall taste and see that the Lord is good."

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

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