

The Kitchen: The Word and Spirit Nourish the Church

Nehemiah 8:1-8

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If you were to ask most people to name their favorite room in the house, the winner would generally be the kitchen. Where do people tend to stand and hang around the most, particularly around noon and 6:00 pm? The kitchen. Why is the room so popular? Why does it get so much attention and visitation? Why can a really good kitchen sell someone on buying the whole house?

The kitchen is where one of our most basic survival needs are met—food. If we don't eat, we die. The human body has to have food and water. Further, the kitchen represents not just basic survival needs like bread and water but also savory delights—roast beef dinner, soft crescent rolls, banana split ice cream, waffles, and anything Jennifer makes for me.

The kitchen is where the food is. Food meets a basic need *and* a healthy diet in the kitchen means a generally healthy family in the house. Similarly, malnutrition or poor nutrition means weakness and sickness throughout the house.

In this teaching series we've been studying God's blueprint for a vibrant church using the metaphor of the design of a house. The foundation of the church is Jesus and his glory and gospel. The living room is a life of worship where all of life is lived to the glory of God. The family room is the fellowship room and a vibrant church will be alive with relationships among God's people that express love and unity.

Today, we are in the kitchen where the primary nourishment is. I say primary because God grows and nourishes us in all the rooms of the house and a house that is only a kitchen is not much of a house. Still, would you want to live in a house without a kitchen? Would you want to live in a dorm without a cafeteria? You get the idea.

Our main point today is that God has so ordained the spiritual vitality of a church that the spiritual nourishment of a congregation comes primarily from the proclamation and application of God's Word. As goes the pulpit, so goes the church. I would like to demonstrate this by one of the great moments for God's people in Scripture—Nehemiah 8.

Nehemiah 8 comes on the heels of the amazing completion of the protective wall around the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah had come to Jerusalem burdened that the walls were in ruins, and more importantly, the spiritual condition of the people was in ruins as well. The restoration of the wall was the first step in the restoration of the people. The wall was finished. The city was safe. But the soul of the city and the people needed to be revived.

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaijah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum,

Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. (Nehemiah 8:1-5)

The passage goes on to describe the remarkable effect: extreme awareness of sin and contrition, repentance and obedience, joy and gladness, celebration, newfound care and concern for the needs of others.

We are going to look at this from the perspective of the kitchen and what is most familiar to all of us, eating a meal. First, the food.

The Food – The Word of God

Verse 1 sets the table. The people gather as “one man.” Why are they there? *And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses.* They are united in a desire to hear God’s Word. The Book of the Law of Moses was the law that God gave Israel at Mt. Sinai that described their covenantal obligations with God and God’s expectations for them. It could have been Exodus or Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

What is significant is that for the first time in a very long time, Israel cared what God said. We see this in the reverence they have for Scripture. First, the people are eager to hear it. They gathered together for the hearing of it. Nobody wanted to miss it.

Second, they are the ones who call for the book to be read. Ezra doesn’t have to say, “Okay everyone, quiet down, you need to hear this!” The people are the ones calling for it; urging it to be read; wanting to hear and understand.

Third, when the book is opened to be read, all the people stand. Why would they do so? They did so out of reverence for what would be read. You may say, “That’s nice and perhaps we could do that here as long as, you know, it’s not a long passage.” This reading of God’s Word went on for hours.

When I was a teenager I had the opportunity to go to Washington DC. One of the highlights for me was going to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. I was there with a group of teenagers and the silliness that can entail. I remember looking at the tomb and the soldier standing at rapt attention in front of it. Not a muscle was twitching but they all looked flexed. There were some people there, maybe in our group even, who were talking and carrying on. I remember after this went on, the soldier standing guard began a very dignified military walk toward the group and holding his weapon in front of him shouted, “It is required that you remain silent at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier!” It got quiet real quick. He went back and stood. We stood. Suddenly the reverence of the place was brought to bear upon us all.

That was the feel here. Their sense that God had helped them complete the wall, overcome danger from enemies, created a great reverence for God and his Word. *But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.* (Isaiah 66:2)

An early question here is, are we like that? Do we have a kind of reverential trembling before God’s Word? Do we sense the authority and sacredness of God’s Word? Would the chant ever ring out among us, “Ezra, bring out the book! Bring out the book! We want to hear from God!”

Serving the food – The sermon (and whenever Scripture is taught)

Imagine the scene: The old city of Jerusalem. The new wall providing the backdrop. A huge crowd gathers. They urge Ezra to read God's Word. There's one problem. The Scriptures are written in Hebrew. By this time, it was an old language and not well understood, particularly by those who were speaking the more contemporary Aramaic. They could hear it but they could not understand it.

The Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:7-8)

The Levites were designated by God to serve the spiritual needs of the people. They knew the language, they knew the Law, and they knew the people. So here's the scene. Ezra is reading the Law. As he reads, the Levites translate and interpret it throughout the crowd, each in their area, "giving the sense, so that the people could understand the reading." The word there giving the sense means "to separate" or to "set apart." The NIV translates this, *making it clear and giving the meaning*. That is a pretty good definition of a biblical sermon—to make it clear and give the meaning. We call that *exposition*. *Ex* = "Out from." *Position* = "meaning."

Exposition or expository preaching begins with the text of Scripture itself, explains the meaning of the text, and applies the historical meaning to our contemporary day. It takes the flour and eggs and meat and carrots of the Word and arranges them into a meal that God's people can receive, understand, and apply.

Some people confuse this and think expository preaching is only when you go verse by verse through a passage. It often is that, but it is more than that. It is a high view of God which trembles at his Word and sees that what God says is more important than what we say or think. *"Expository preaching is not so much a method as it is a mind-set. A minister who sees himself as an expositor knows that he is not the master of the Word, but its servant."* (Philip Ryken)

Expository preaching makes much of God and Christ as the organizing themes of the whole of Scripture, and beginning with the text of Scripture, declares God's glory and greatness over and into every aspect of society, culture, and the church.

Biblical admonitions to biblical preaching:

- *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. (Matthew 28:19-20)*
- *Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Timothy 4:13)*
- *And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. (2 Timothy 2:2)*
- *But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)*

Doesn't all preaching do this? No. Simply reading a text doesn't make it expositional. Exposition is when the meaning and the points the Holy Spirit inspired in Scripture form the organization of meaning and application of the message. The reason that this is important is that the power that affects change in the human heart doesn't come from the preacher; no matter how articulate or oratorically gifted he may be. Spiritual power comes from God,

particularly the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God illuminates and applies the Word of God to the hearts of the people of God.

This is what I felt in my soul when I was introduced to expository preaching at College Park Church. As Kimber preached, deep down inside of me, God was at work. Some weeks more than others and often imperceptibly; sometimes profoundly when, like the disciples with Jesus on the Emmaus road, my heart burned within me as the Scripture was opened to me.

God's Word does what human words can never do—produce spiritual life. This can be in salvation through the gospel or to grow us in our knowledge of God or to help us principally in some practical aspect of life. It is wonderful when it does.

What kind of church do we want to be? A hungry church that comes to the kitchen craving a meal from God's Word. We want to cultivate an appetite for the right kind of meal—expositional, doctrinal, and theological.

This is a mindset and a "heartset" where, within the community of faith, Scripture is treasured and trumps man's opinions and man's traditions and for that matter, everything else. As the Reformers said it, *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7-10)

The kitchen is for eating and the meal is the Word of God proclaimed and the Word of God explained. I would also add that this is one of the core expectations on the pastors in general and the senior pastor in particular. Do we have a biblical profile of what a pastor does? There are many things, but central to his ministry is the ministry of the Word in sermons and counseling and comforting and leading.

Eating the food – A listening, learning, and applying congregation

And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (Nehemiah 8:12)

"*They understood the words that were declared to them.*" I take this to mean that the words didn't simply go in one ear and out the other. Rather, they went into the ear, to the brain, and brought about change in the heart. They understood the words and they were eager to apply them.

The desire to know God and know his Word is a fruit of true salvation. The natural man doesn't get it and doesn't understand. We need the Spirit to understand.

You can have a great meal served in front of you and it can do you no good whatsoever. For that food in front of you to do any good, it has to go from in front of you to inside you. We call this eating. Anyone not familiar with how this works?

The picture is a helpful one and even potentially humorous. Imagine a table surrounded by kids who haven't eaten all day. They are in desperate need of food. In front of them is a

meal. It has everything their bodies need. Nutrients. Vitamins. Carbohydrates. Over here is a bowl full of peas. Over there is a plate of asparagus. In the middle is a big dish of something they are not sure about, but Mom said it was good for them. What can you see happening? The children are crinkling their noses and one of them asks, "Can I have a cookie?" What they really need to grow strong is right there in front of them. It may or may not be what they prefer, but it is most definitely what they need.

Biblical expository preaching is like that. Sometimes it's meat and potatoes. Sometimes it's peas and broccoli. Sometimes it's salad. Sometimes it's dessert. To get it from the table to the heart is the responsibility of the individual.

How to Eat a Sermon

Bring your utensils

Did you bring them with you today? *Like what?* A Bible. Some of you have gone digital and that's okay, but what do you bring to math class? A math book. What do you bring to geography class? A geography book. What do you bring to a Bible-preaching worship service? I would suggest a Bible.

Further, do anything that will help you get everything out of it. I am a note taker. When I write things down it helps me and I can look at it again later. Sit in a spot in church that will minimize distractions. Whatever it might be, do whatever you can to put maximum biblical truth into your heart so that the Spirit can do his thing.

Savor every dish

All sermons are trying to say something. Listen for those things. Most will follow some kind of organization and flow from a central thought. If it's preached well, you should pick up the central point pretty easily. If you listen well, you can also follow the thought and development.

By "savor every dish," I mean that all of God's Word is inspired including truths we don't naturally like. Try them and savor them. Think of them as gifts to you. Swallow your peas. Eat your broccoli.

Listen as if your life depended on it. I have often thought of this when preparing to take off on a flight. They go through the same routine on all the flights. Flight attendants demonstrate how to put on the oxygen mask in case of emergency. How many people are actually listening? Hardly anybody. Why? Flying is so safe, we feel no urgency.

Many people listen to sermons like pre-flight announcements. It's part of the routine we go through, but we don't think that our lives depend on them.

Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 4 that he must watch his life and doctrine closely because if he does it will save himself as well as his hearers. In other words, sermons are part of how God keeps spiritual life alive in us. We should listen to them as if our spiritual lives depend on it.

"Steve, come on. I can miss a sermon and do okay." Yeah, and you can miss a meal, but if you continue to miss a meal, what happens?

Lick the plate/Take a doggy bag

“Lick the plate” means I am trying to get every last molecule out of it. That is not to suggest that everything that is said in a sermon is itself worthy of licking. Rather, it is the belief that God can use anything said to benefit us. Most pastors would tell you that what we consider our worst sermons often are the ones God uses the most. Lick the plate. Consider all of it.

Take a doggy bag. A good sermon will always have stuff to enjoy later. As you listen, write down, or at least consider, *What am I taking with me into my week? What is my doggy bag?* Write that takeaway down and put it somewhere for meditation. Listen to the sermon again on podcast or on video. Talk with family or friends about it later.

Over time, as the plate is licked and the doggy bag is enjoyed, God’s people become people of the book; learners who develop into competent theologians who love and enjoy God in everything.

So that’s the kitchen. Let’s lick the plate and look for our doggy bag.

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