

Lecture 23 - Prepare to Answer

I'd like to read you a little story from Calvin Miller's new book titled *An Owners Manual for the Unfinished Soul*.

(Read Penteuchio)

The burden of God . . . to give mankind the gift of free will and then watch as they choose to run away. We know some of those who have chosen that course. Many we love and come in contact with have chosen to reject Him. Thank God that someone cared enough about you and me to share the “good news” that God did not move . . . we did. He's there wanting us to love Him because He first loved us. So much so that He provided the way back . . . He gave His one and only Son to die for our sins so that we might have the free gift of eternal life in His presence forever.

Throughout the study of John's gospel we have asked you to consider 1 Peter 3:15 which says, “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect . . . ”

Let's review the questions we asked you to be ready to answer:

“How do you know there is a God?”

“What does ‘born again’ really mean?”

“Why are there so many different kinds of churches if there is only one God and one Bible?”

“Isn't sickness a sign that there is sin in your life?”

“I can’t believe unless I see a miracle for myself.”
“How can I know God’s will for my life?”
“I know Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery, but I’ve never committed any big sin like that.”
“Satan isn’t real.”
“Does God hear the prayers of unbelievers?”
“If Jesus came to give such an abundant life, why aren’t you better off financially?”
“Will my physical body be resurrected, or just my soul?”
“Jesus had the support of the people when He rode into Jerusalem. Why didn’t He set up His kingdom then?”
“If Jesus knew Judas would betray Him, why did He pick Judas in the first place?”
“How does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit change you?”
“I’m afraid of what my friends will say.”
“Jesus talked about having trouble in this world as a Christian. I’m afraid I can’t stand up under persecution.”
“I feel so far away from God. What should I do?”
In witnessing you have asked your listener to make a choice for Jesus now.
He responds, “I’ll think about it and maybe do it later.”
How do you explain the importance of the cross and Jesus’ blood atonement?
“I thought only God could forgive sin. What does verse 23 mean?”
“I know I have a lot of faults, but a lot more people are worse than I am!”

Those are some pretty meaty questions to have to answer. You may never encounter all of them, but they are, nonetheless, concerns of the unsaved. To answer those questions we must know what we believe and why we believe it. I’m proud of you for the time and attention you gave to forming answers to those questions.

You know, to me, when I think about it, there are nine essentials of the faith:

- 1) the infallibility of Scripture (it is the very Word of God);
- 2) the deity of Jesus as eternal Son of God;

- 3) the virgin birth;
- 4) historic creation - not organic evolution;
- 5) the depravity of man; (Depravity doesn't mean humanity is as bad as he can be, but rather he is as bad off as he can be . . . Scriptures measure men by God's standard, not the standards of other men.)
- 6) the substitutionary death of Christ (His blood paid for all our sin);
- 7) the bodily resurrection of Christ;
- 8) the literal return of Christ to the earth;
- 9) the resurrection of all people to either heaven/hell.

The lesson you did at home this week and discussed in your small groups was designed to help you think through what you know to be true about the Bible, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit and your position as a child of God.

Every child can hardly wait to grow up. They hunger to become teenagers, to obtain a driver's license, to become adults. In the same way, there are many in the churches who desire to grow. They want to gain a deeper awareness of Christian truths, a stronger faith for living, and maturity in their lives. That hunger is commendable because spiritual growth is important! We're told to be considerate of the weaker brother, but they also have an obligation to grow up.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, he criticized them for falling short of God's desire for their personal growth. He wrote in

chapter 3:2 “I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed you are still not ready.”

God wants us to grow! He wants us to move beyond the elementary stages of milk into maturity and the meaning of meat. You are doing that by your efforts in this Bible Study . . . preparing yourselves by being grounded in the Word of God to share the Good News with others – those who have never heard “God loves them” or with those who have run away from the Father like Penteuchio did.

John Kramp begins his book on evangelism titled *Out of Their Faces and into Their Shoes*, with this honest observation: “Christians and non-Christians agree on one thing -- both dislike evangelism. The word alone conjures up images of “in your face” confrontation. Therefore Christians usually avoid gospel showdowns and most non-Christians are relieved they do.” He continues, “When evangelism is attempted it rarely begins with “being in your shoes” empathy. If Christians really understood the spiritually lost people around them, they would talk about faith more naturally. Evangelism would be more of a conversation and less of a high-pressure sales pitch.”

How are you when it comes to talking about your faith? Is it a natural part of your conversation? One little boy came home from Sunday School and his mother asked, “What was your teacher’s name?” He replied, “I’m not sure, but I think she was Jesus’ grandmother. He’s all she talked about.” You know, many Christians can’t necessarily tell

you a lot about Jesus' life or the doctrines He taught, but they do know about the stories He told. The prodigal son is one of the most familiar. People like stories . . . and the story of your life before and after Christ is a wonderfully simply way to begin to share the gospel. A great many of us were prodigals at some time in our lives.

Chuck Swindoll offers seven suggestions for an effective testimony: 1) don't preach/ just talk; 2) don't generalize/be specific; 3) don't be vague/be clear and simple; 4) don't defend yourself/just declare your story; 5) keep your testimony brief; 6) follow a logical progression; 7) glorify God not yourself.

We know not everyone will listen to what we want to share, but it starts with compassion – empathy – being in their shoes – and the realization that without us sowing the seeds, there will be no reaping. It is not so much perfecting a “pat answer” presentation, as it is looking at the lost or backslidden soul through the eyes of Jesus, feeling the burden of God, and desiring with all your heart to be gracious and truthful.

You know, over the past twenty years or so, I figure I've listened to about nine hundred Sunday morning sermons and sat through or given at least as many Sunday school lessons and Bible study lectures. Christian teachers have wowed me, wooed me, and walloped me with God's Word. Their books and notebooks line my shelves like tin soldiers, ready to battle heresy and lead me to spiritual victory. Yet I sometimes wonder how much of this steady barrage of truth has sunk

into my heart and how much has skittered across the surface like pebbles on a frozen lake.

If we're not careful, our hearts can become hardened to the constant input of truth. Or we can get that glazed "this is milk"--"I've heard this before" look as we sit back for a half-hour mental siesta. Or we can treat scriptural truths like collectibles, neatly gathering and storing them for display. All the while, though, the flame in our heart is slowly sputtering out.

I want to close by reminding you of some dangers to your own spiritual growth:

Our growth could be distorted if we have the feeling that what we hear in our present church isn't really meat. Many spend church lives jumping from church to church seeking rainbows or windmills, never recognizing they already possess God's message.

Or feeling that meat must somehow be different than milk. If it isn't different, if it isn't new, then it isn't meat. Cults thrive on that -- offering the new and different. Newness is not a requirement for spiritual meat. Often it is that simple childhood faith that God intends as the meat for our lives.

Being familiar with Scripture can lead us to thinking we "know" it so well, there's nothing else to learn. For example, that story of the prodigal . . . If that's the passage being presented do you find yourself thinking, "What can be new about that?" We constantly have to

remember that one person's meat may be another person's milk. In every church there are people who are mature in one area and childish in another. The key is that God's Word will not come back null and void. If the teaching touches a tender nerve, listen carefully. You probably need the pure milk of the Word. If what you hear you already practice, listen for what God wants to say to challenge you and pray for those around you.

Growth is truly a personal decision. We need more than sermons and teaching. Growth comes through our own willingness to read, study and follow Scripture in our daily lives. One major difference between the high school student and the college student is a viewpoint of learning. A high school attitude is just learn what teacher gives in the classroom. College students understand that reading and study outside the classroom are equally as important as what is learned in a classroom lecture.

In Bible study much of the value comes in what we do at home. Growth comes from within ourselves. We will grow if we want to grow. We will learn if we want to learn. The decision to take the time to do so is up to us.

Like the parable Jesus told of hidden talents. Why should we expect God to supply additional wisdom and maturity until the person applies the understanding he or she has? The multiplication of rewards

to servants was given to those who wisely used the gifts they were already given.

We know the milk about stewardship and about forgiveness. Do we practice it? Hebrews 5:14 says “solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

Penteuchio’s heart was as hard as his little head. He ran from the Father even after he’d been exposed to the full message of the Torah. We have a New Testament . . . a roadmap to grace . . . a thrilling opportunity to view a personal Savior up close . . . to visualize the nails in His hands and the wound in His side. Like Thomas times of doubt creep in, but the vision of the Risen Savior renews our faith. Like Anthony Campolo says, “It’s Friday . . . but Sunday’s Comin’!” What a precious privilege to have the choice to utilize the full counsel of God’s Word to increase our own spiritual maturity and serve a wonderful living God. And with the privilege we have an obligation to share that Good News with a lost and dying world. God is extending to us a dinner invitation. Christ Jesus is the host. Sit down each week with us and share in some milk and some meat. I encourage you to commit yourself to finish out this year’s study after the Easter break. And I encourage you to consider over these next two weeks “the burden of God.” Will we prepare ourselves and extend ourselves to help carry the burden? Like the campfire meal on the shore with the risen Lord, may it be the best meal you’ve ever tried.

