

# Sermon: Milk

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1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

*by Eric Anderson*

Milk is a miraculous thing. It wraps up nutrition and hydration into a single substance, one that will keep an infant not just going but growing at about an inch a month for the first six months. It's gentle on upset stomachs and, at least by the evidence of milky smiles, pretty satisfying.

The thing is, a time comes when it doesn't meet the nutritional needs of a growing child, at least not at the rate that a human mother can produce it. Like other animals, people switch from the foods of infancy to the foods of childhood. With time, the food of adulthood might even supplement the foods of childhood, including such delicacies as broccoli, brussels sprouts, kale, and natto.

Some of those may not be eaten by adults either. President George H. W. Bush famously removed broccoli from the White House menu.

The point is that milk is a place to start, and a very good place to start. The Apostle Paul had that in mind when he wrote about his first days in the foundation of the church in Corinth, "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food."

They weren't. They really weren't. So much of Christianity relies upon some familiarity, some understanding, of the history of Israel and Israel's God. In Corinth, one of the largest and most important cities of first century Greece, such familiarity existed almost entirely among the Jewish population. As I mentioned last week, however, early Christians such as Paul sought to offer the Good News to the nations, to those not already raised in the traditions of Israel. Not only did non-Jews come in with understandings of different gods who had related to humanity in very different ways, they simply didn't know the stories of Abraham, or of Moses. They didn't know about David or Solomon or Isaiah or Jeremiah. They had so much to learn for this Good News to start making sense, to start having some impact, to start guiding their daily lives.

We don't get much sense of how Paul and those like him did that, how they brought the Good News to a non-Jewish population. The closest we get is a moment in the Book of Acts when Paul complimented the people of Athens for their piety, praising the existence of their altar to "an unknown God."

“Let me tell you about this unknown God,” said Paul, “because this unknown God has come with Good News.”

Here in First Corinthians, however, Paul wasn't being so complimentary. As Richard P. Carlson writes at Working Preacher:

“The term ‘babies in Christ’ (the NRSV translation ‘infants in Christ’ robs Paul’s phrase of its edge) is multivalent:

- First, Paul is including them within the body of Christ even if they immaturely use the ways and means of this age to evaluate themselves and others in their Christian community.
- Second, it is polemical by categorizing them as childish, as in, these elitists are a bunch of big babies.
- Third, by extending the imagery in 3:2 to include, ‘I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food’ (3:2a), Paul has imaged himself as their mother who has been nursing them.”

In other words, Paul’s expression was that of every toddler’s mother when said child has broken something they were told not to play with. You know the expression. You’ve worn it, perhaps, or seen it on another parent. Heaven help us all, we’ve all seen it from the height of a toddler, I suspect. The expression that says, “I’m really disappointed in you right now.” Paul the mother was not happy, and if mother ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.

The issue Paul and the Corinthians faced was that of rival groups clumping up amongst the members of the church and aligning with various leaders. “I belong to Apollos,” they’d say, an apostle who worked with the church after Paul, or “I belong to Cephas,” which is the Aramaic form of Peter, Simon Peter. Or they’d say, “I belong to Paul,” which didn’t make mother Paul any happier.

Despite the fact that Christians continue to cluster around leaders as if they were Christ, rather than Christ, I’m going to ignore that and concentrate on the overwhelming reality Paul described as he sought to address that crisis.

Spirituality is about growth.

It isn’t static. It isn’t one-baptism-fixes-all. It isn’t “I’ve got it all wrapped up in a nice neat package, thank you, Paul, and I’m all set from here.” No. None of that. It’s about growth.

When you think about it, human life is about growth, isn’t it? Is it a real surprise that soul, spirituality, and faith would be?

The secret is to nourish it. Start with the basics, the things from which new understandings can be summoned. There is a God who loves you and is on your side. In the first century, there were religious options that did not include that as a foundational premise. Plenty of deities could be described as, at best, vaguely interested in human beings.

In the twenty-first century, we still struggle with the proclamation of a God who loves you and is on your side. There are a lot of theologies that understand God's grace as severely limited, circumscribed to a steadily smaller group of people. Sometimes I wonder if these spiral down to a single person. "I belong to me." Without this milk, though, how can anybody grow into a fuller faith? Without the assurance that I can disappoint mother Paul and the God he served *and* still be loved, what purpose is there to growing in the faith?

There is a lot of stuff to learn in nourishing our spirits. There are stories. There is Scripture. This is a witness to over a thousand years of peoples' experiences with God, culminating in the appearance of Jesus Christ, his teaching, his death, and his resurrection. It's useful to the spirit to distinguish between Abraham and Ezekiel, between Samuel and Nehemiah, between Peter and Paul and James and John. That's why we teach these things to youngsters. It rests on the foundation of "God loves you and is on your side."

But if we're going to be those spiritual people of whom Paul wrote, we've got to come face to face with the most demanding of them all: Jesus. Jesus here in Matthew 5 is not "gentle Jesus, meek and mild." This is "it's not easy" Jesus, and "I expect things from you" Jesus, and "I'm setting the bar higher" Jesus, and I don't think I can jump that high.

These verses telling us to abandon anger, and to refrain from indulging in lust, and to hold strictly to truth, are among the most challenging of the Bible. They focus, however, on the three great sensitivities of human relationships. Long before there's violence, expression of anger separates siblings, breaks the bonds between parent and child, ends friendships. Long before there's adultery, unbridled indulgence in sexual fantasy both harms marriages and damages friendships. As for truth, well.

What kind of relationship do you want with someone who lies?

Karoline Lewis writes at Working Preacher, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you' then poses the question we need to ask ourselves and those whom we accompany in ministry—are we fulfilling all righteousness? All justice? Or does our doing of faith stop short, accepting adequacy all too quickly? Does our discipleship tend to defer to the norm because the norm is easier and expedient? Jesus' antitheses might sound antagonistic or like a 'do better' moral motivational mantra. But that's the easy way out of his true ask—to hunger for righteousness, to thirst for justice, and then to exceed the norm (5:20)."

The point of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was not to end anger – as a feeling, anger is going to happen whether we want it to or not – but to end its impact on human relationships. It was not to end divorce – sometimes relationships end – but to reduce the things that make adultery more likely. It was not to end falsehood – OK, yes it was. While I recognize the existence and good motives behind soothing lies, I think we're almost always better off saying nothing than in telling an untruth.

Milk. It's a miracle food, but its spiritual equivalent won't help you manage your anger or your desires, and it won't help you keep it 100 (thank you, Larry Wilmore). It won't align you to truth. It's the growth that does it, provided by parents, friends, Sunday School teachers, Bible Studies, worship services, special lectures, Scripture reading, devotional reading, reading reading reading, prayer prayer prayer.

It's the growth.

Amen.