

2. The Price We Pay for Food: 'Cheap' Food?

Bible Passages:

Leviticus 25:1-12 & 18-24

¹ The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai, ² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a sabbath to the Lord. ³ For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. ⁴ But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards. ⁵ Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest. ⁶ Whatever the land yields during the sabbath year will be food for you - for yourself, your male and female servants, and the hired worker and temporary resident who live among you, ⁷ as well as for your livestock and the wild animals in your land. Whatever the land produces may be eaten. ⁸ Count off seven sabbath years - seven times seven years - so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. ⁹ Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. ¹⁰ Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. ¹¹ The fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; do not sow and do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the untended vines. ¹² For it is a jubilee and is to be holy for you; eat only what is taken directly from the fields.

¹⁸ "Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land. ¹⁹ Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety. ²⁰ You may ask, "What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?" ²¹ I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years. ²² While you plant during the eighth year, you will eat from the old crop and will continue to eat from it until the harvest of the ninth year comes in.

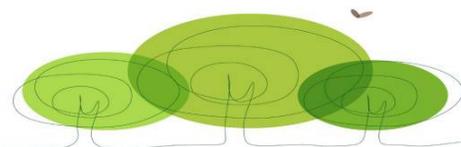
²³ "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. ²⁴ Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

Luke 12:16-21

¹⁶ And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. ¹⁷ He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' ¹⁸ "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. ¹⁹ And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" ²⁰ "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' ²¹ "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God."

Summary:

Food is about relationships – with ourselves, the land, other people and with God. Today, many of those relationships are unhealthy, distorted or broken. Some biblical principles to help us include:



- Remembering – that the world and all it produces, including food, are God’s
- Restraint – in not pushing the land beyond its limits and recognising it is not just to provide profit for a few people, but to sustain all living creatures.
- Respect – for people, for animals and for the earth itself.

Introduction:

What is your relationship with food? Is it simply fuel for the journey, grabbing whatever is easiest, tastiest, sweetest ... or do you spend time and energy making careful decisions over food? Our relationship with food tells us a lot about all our relationships:

- with ourselves - whether we have a healthy or unhealthy view of our bodies, whether or not what we put into them reflects the fact our bodies are temples of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- with our neighbour – we’ll look at this next week, but today food justice is a vital issue in world where millions throw away tonnes of food whilst 1/6th of the world goes hungry.
- with the land – whether we acknowledge creation as God’s world to be treasured and protected, or whether we see it simply as a resource to be exploited, and finally ...
- with God – how we eat, what we eat, and the price we pay for our food tell us a lot about our relationship with God.

Today we’re going to consider what our Western culture of ‘cheap food’ says about us – about our relationships with ourselves, others, the land and our relationship with God. Consider a few recent news stories and statistics, and ask what these say about our values and relationships:

- From ‘Farmers Weekly’ - a £10 scientific study is examining whether a ‘cocktail of pesticides’ may be responsible for an alarming fall in bee numbers.¹
- According to Sir John Beddington “It is predicted that by 2030 the world will need to produce 50% more food and energy, together with 30% more available fresh water.”²
- Farming in the UK needs 6,000 new entrants a year for 10 years if it is to survive, according to the Royal Agricultural Society of England³
- World hunger increased in 2009, due to increased food prices and unemployment. There are now over 1 billion undernourished people worldwide.⁴
- A food system that generates cheap, fatty, filling foods at the expense of healthier food is calculated in the US to cost \$147 billion per year in treating obesity and other medical conditions related to unhealthy food.⁵
- Britain is throwing away half of all the food produced on farms⁶
- Run-off from chemical fertilisers in the American mid-west flows into the Gulf of Mexico where it has led to a 6,000 square mile dead zone, with no oxygen and hence no life. This is one of about 400 dead zones that now exist around the world.⁷

¹ Quoted by Graham Harvey, “A Call for a Farming Renaissance”, Manna Magazine, Sept. 2010, p.6

² Professor Sir John Beddington, UK Govt. Chief Scientific Advisor, March 2009, quoted in A Rocha UK magazine, Feb. 2011, p.4

³ Quoted in A Rocha UK magazine, Feb. 2011, p.5

⁴ BBC Website ‘The Cost of Food’, 19th January 2010

⁵ Time Magazine, “Getting Real about the High Price of Cheap Food”, August 2009

⁶ Lord Haskins, former head of Northern Foods, Independent on Sunday, 2nd March 2008)

⁷ Time Magazine, “Getting Real about the High Price of Cheap Food”, August 2009

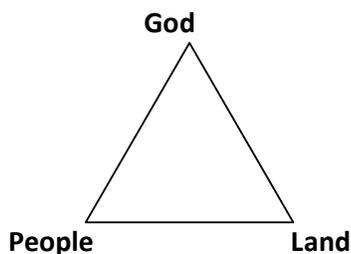


The American writer Wendell Berry, a farmer, poet, philosopher and Christian, says this: “This is blasphemy: to make shoddy work of the work of God.”⁸ Today we need to ask ourselves, has our obsession with cheap, fast food become blasphemous?

Broken Relationships:

As Psalm 24:1 says, ‘The earth is the lord’s and everything it’. However, in our present agricultural system, God’s land is being squeezed for maximum profit, with little or no regard for the health of the soil, plants and wildlife. So, what is the real price we pay for our cheap food in the UK and how can we honour God in the way we eat?

Our relationship with food can be pictured as a triangle, with God, people and land as the three corners.



Although relationships between God and people, people and other people and people and the land were broken at the fall, the reconciling work of Jesus’ death on the cross has made possible the restoration of these relationships. However, rather than nurturing these restored relationships, our current agricultural system is often based on a series of radical disconnections, where relationships throughout creation are being destroyed.

Relationships between people are severed, as the farmers that grow our food become increasingly anonymous. Do you know who made your daily bread? Relationships between people and place are broken, as we become less and less aware of where and how our food is grown. Do you know who where in the world your breakfast cereal was grown? And lastly, relationships within the natural world are being destroyed as bigger and bigger farms emerge, with less and less people in sight, specialising in just one or two standardised crops. These industrial farms rely heavily on oil-based fertilisers and large amounts of farm machinery. Environmentally speaking, this mechanised farming style leads to soil degradation, water pollution and biodiversity loss, and socially speaking, the large-scale expensive nature of this kind of farming means that small farmers become poorer are pushed out.

In addition to this oil-dependent arable farming, intensive animal farming is also on the rise in the form of ‘factory farms’ for cows, pigs and chickens. Before the twentieth century, eating meat was regarded as a luxury, due to cost and availability, but now it is eaten most days by many Europeans and Americans. According to Edinburgh University Ethics Professor Michael Northcott, the average American consumes twice their body weight in meat in one year, with the average European not far behind.⁹ But at what cost? Factory farms turn God’s creatures into machines with no value other than providing us with cheap protein. For example, industrial pig-rearing means that the animal lives in a rectangular gestation crate, designed so that the animal can do no more than stand up or lie down, its tail sometimes chopped off so that it won’t be eaten by the pig

⁸ Wendell Berry “The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry”, p.312

⁹M. S Northcott, “Eucharistic Eating”, p.2



next door.

There is also a massive amount of waste in our current food system. Firstly on the land, the division of animal and arable farming means that animal waste is not being used as a valuable part of the nitrogen cycle, but is instead becomes a hazardous pollutant. Secondly in the home, around 8.3 million tonnes of food is wasted in British homes each year – over 80% of it perfectly edible! So at the moment, we spend less money on food in the UK than ever before - the proportion of household income spent on food is now less than 10% in contrast to 30% in most European countries, but waste a colossal amount!

Graham Harvey, a farming writer who's also written more than 500 episodes of Radio 4's 'The Archers' says this: "Like the banking system a couple of years ago, our agricultural industry is no longer fit for purpose. It doesn't feed us well. And it doesn't feed us in ways that safeguard the earth's resources for our grandchildren. Clearly Christians, like other groups, should be working hard to reform it."¹⁰

How do we think God feels about a food system that relies so heavily on fossil fuels, that destroys soil fertility, devastates local wildlife, pollutes rivers and ground water, abuses animals, drives small farmers off the land, and leads to huge amounts of waste? Clearly, the cheap price of the food in our supermarkets does not reflect the true cost to creation. As Christians, it is important for us to question and challenge the way our food system currently operates, and instead encourage good-quality, healthy food practices that nurture the health not just of us and our families, but of the whole creation - protecting the health of the soil, the animals, the water, the forests, the animals; in short, the whole created order.

We need to do this, not based on a political agenda, an economic agenda or a green agenda, but by applying biblical principles to the realities of today's world. So, what are some of the biblical principles that speak to the price we pay for food?

1. REMEMBERING

Firstly, we need to remember that this is God's world. Knowing that the earth – including its farmland and the crops and animals that live there – belong not to us, nor to farmers, nor to agribusiness but to God, should affect how we grow, buy and use food. In Leviticus 25:23, God reminds the Israelites that even the Promised Land wasn't actually theirs – it was his: "the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers". Thus we are answerable to God for our use or abuse of the land.

Psalm 50:10-11 says: "for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine." The distinction we make between wild, farm and domestic animals carries no weight with God – they are all actually his.

When we buy our food from a supermarket or shop, or even order it online, it's easy to forget that these are the fruits of the earth and gifts of God's grace. We need to remember – consciously remind ourselves – that all our food comes from God. Then, and only then, we can begin to ask whether our food brings glory to God in how it is grown, transported, packaged, prepared and eaten.

¹⁰ Quoted by Graham Harvey, "A Call for a Farming Renaissance", Manna Magazine, Sept. 2010, p.6



As we do our shopping, perhaps we can stop and remember that all that we look at is God's. We can then weigh up whether to buy cheap mass-produced products which do us little good, and some of which will end up uneaten in our bins, or whether to pay slightly more and buy slightly less of something that actually speaks of the goodness of God – something local, seasonal, grown or reared in a way that pleases God and that, with him, we can look at and say 'It is very good'.

2. RESTRAINT

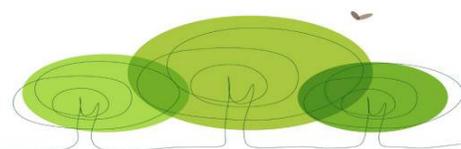
Secondly, farming needs to exercise restraint. Our role as human beings is to 'tend and keep' the garden, according to Genesis 2:15. Tending involves agriculture, horticulture and farming – it is about using the land wisely and making it productive. 'Keeping' is the other side of the story. It is about preserving and protecting the land and its creatures, about nurturing, guarding and stewarding. There is a principle here of keeping the balance between productivity and protection, between crop-yields and conservation. It is the principle of restraint, and we badly need to re-learn it today. Time and again, the bible insists that we use restraint in how we use the earth and its resources, and in particular in how we farm.

Jesus' Parable of the Rich Landowner in Luke 12 critiques a farmer who has no restraint. He is intent on increasing the profit of his farm at the expense of the wider community and of God's creation. In many ways, 'building bigger barns' to 'store up surplus grain' makes total economic sense. However, profit is not the only principle at stake. God makes the land produce its harvests, not to increase the profits of shareholders, but so that people might be fed and creation might be blessed. Farming that fails to balance the economic motive with environmental and social sustainability is directly attacked here by Jesus. The rich landowner is rebuked for 'storing up things for himself, without being rich towards his Maker' and God takes his life away from him. In our era of chemical agriculture, bigger and bigger barns are constantly being erected. There are plans for super-dairies where thousands of cows are reared indoors as if they are simply units of production, rather than God's creatures. There are already vast prairie crops of monocultures, sprayed with pesticides so that nothing else might live there. What a contrast to the biblical vision in Leviticus 25, where the land is to have a sabbath rest every seven years, and where it will still produce enough for people, and for both farm animals and wildlife.

God's promise is also clear in Leviticus 25:18-19: "Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land. ¹⁹ Then the land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety." But today, as we fail to follow God's decrees, if we are greedy and seek to squeeze more and more from the soil because we want our food to be cheaper and cheaper, should we be surprised if we no longer live safely in the land – if our food security is threatened?

3. RESPECT

Thirdly, food production needs to show respect – for animals, for people and for the earth itself. Today, the way we produce much of our meat has become a major ethical scandal ... all in the name of cheap food. We are told in Proverbs 12:10 that "a righteous man cares for the needs of his animal", and elsewhere in scripture God repeatedly commands people to give appropriate rest to their farm animals, to allow farm and wild animals to eat the gleanings and the margins, and of course Jesus rebuked the Pharisees when they would not allow an ox that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath to be rescued.



Many of you will have seen TV programmes exposing the standards of factory-farmed chickens, or of pigs kept in stalls where they can't move. Some of you may have changed channels quickly to avoid seeing them. Yet as Christians we must face the issue of the price we pay for meat. We can pretend we don't have a relationship with the food we eat, but actually we do – and what we eat is a reflection of our values, and ultimately of our relationship with God. If we don't respect the creatures that God has made, what does that say about how little we respect God. To return to Wendell Berry, who I quoted earlier: "This is blasphemy: to make shoddy work of the work of God."¹¹

So, remembering it's God world, restraint in how we use it, and respect for all life and for the land itself. We know that everything in creation was created for God, not us. Everything He created reflects part of His incredibly diverse character and everything He created has inherent value, quite apart from its usefulness to humans. As Christians therefore, let's be conscious consumers, since our consumption habits obviously feed production. As Christians let's stand up and speak out, challenging systems that do not honour God and His creation. And as Christians, let's grow food, buy food and eat food that nurtures the god-given relationships throughout creation and models a new kind of sustainable food system. Above all, whatever we do – let us do it in love.

Watch: "The Price we pay for Food"

Five Minute Video with Professor Michael Northcott, Ruth Valerio and Brother Sam

¹¹ Wendell Berry "The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry", p.312

