

Following God's Recipes

I did something two weeks ago that I hadn't done for a long time. I baked a cake--from scratch. Betty Jane's birthday came while we were at Conference and it happened to be the same day I needed to leave early to come home to prepare for a funeral. With everything happening at Conference and with my mind on the funeral I had been called on to preach the next day, I didn't even think to wish Betty Jane "happy birthday." I had thought of her birthday earlier in the week, but on the actual day I had other things on my mind. I did think of it Tuesday evening, but cell phones don't work well at camp and I knew there was no use calling her then. So Wednesday afternoon after the funeral I baked a cake.

I got out the big mixing bowl and a wooden spoon. I reached for our Grandma Inglebrook cookbook, turned on the oven to 325 degrees as called for, gathered up the ingredients, sifted the flour into the bowl, measured and added the oil and the coco and the sugar, salt, and other special items called for in the recipe, mixed it thoroughly, got out and greased the baking pan, poured the mix into the pan, and popped it into the oven. As it was baking I used the old toothpick dipstick trick to tell me when it was baked clear through to the center. While the cake was baking I followed another recipe to make the icing, and added a little peanut butter to make it special. When Matt brought Betty Jane home from Conference, I iced the cake, put on lots and lots of candles, Matt and I sang happy birthday, and all my forgetfulness the day before was forgiven--at least until just now when I mentioned all those candles.

The cake and the icing were delicious, but the question I want us to think about this morning is why? How did I manage to bake a good cake without any help from Betty Crocker, Duncan Hines, or the bakery at Walmart? The simple truth is that I followed a recipe. I could have relied on my memory of seeing my mother or Betty Jane baking a cake, and put in a pinch of this and a pinch of that. I could have guessed at the ingredients. I could have mixed up some original concoction of my own invention, but I strongly suspect had I done that, the outcome would have been greatly different. I probably couldn't have fed that cake to my dog, and she will eat almost anything. But, I followed the recipe.

Does God have recipes for our salvation, for building successful lives, for putting together a church that will honor Him? I want to suggest to you today that God has a "cookbook" and does have recipes for all these things. But, before we go there I want to remind you of the story we find in I Kings 17. It's the story of a mother in very desperate circumstances. There was a famine in the land and people all around her were starving to death. She believed that she and her only child, a son, were going to be next. While this poor mother is coming to this conclusion God sends the prophet Elijah to help her.

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I Kings 17:10-12 introduce us to the drama as it begins to unfold: "So he (that is, Elijah) went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread--only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it--and die."

It seems quite cruel that Elijah should be instructed to ask food from someone who has so little, but this is the way she and we are introduced to the ingredients necessary for salvation. Verses 13-16 continue the story: "Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'" She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah."

The recipe for our personal salvation as found in this Old Testament passage calls for the following ingredients: The first ingredient in this recipe is an **awareness of our need**; The widow of Zarephath knew that without divine intervention she was doomed; she and her son would die. The second ingredient found in this recipe is **God's grace**. God in His mercy chose this widow for salvation and sent Elijah to help her. Awareness of need is met with God's grace. The third ingredient we see revealed in this story is **the word of the Lord**. Elijah spoke the words of God to the widow of Zarephath. "Don't be afraid." Obey the word of the messenger God has sent. "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land." The final ingredient is **faith proven by obedience**. The widow of Zarephath trusted the message brought to her by Elijah. She showed her trust by baking him a cake before baking anything for herself or for her son. And, this is what I want us to see, the moment she trusted and obeyed God's word, she and her son were saved.

The recipe for our salvation includes the same ingredients: awareness of our need, acceptance of God's grace as provided in the cross of Christ, trust and obedience to the word of Jesus. Whoever puts these ingredients together in his or her life will be saved. **The recipe for our salvation is in the book.**

A second recipe is for building a successful life. Does God have a recipe for this? Indeed, I know He does. There are parts of this recipe throughout the Bible, but if you want to find it in its most concentrated form, pay attention to the book of Proverbs. Here are some ingredients for a successful life as found

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in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." Proverbs 1:8 says, "Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching." Proverbs 1:10 says, "My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them." Proverbs 1:33 speaks of the importance of listening to the wisdom of the Lord; it says, "but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear of harm." The book of Proverbs goes on to warn against the folly of adultery, laziness, putting up collateral for fools, dishonesty, failing to submit to discipline and failing to discipline ones children. It calls us to seek the Lord and to gain knowledge and wisdom, to work hard, to be faithful to our spouses and loyal to our friends, to practice patience and self control. It stresses the value of avoiding quarrels, being humble, and showing kindness to the poor. It warns against arrogance, receiving or offering bribes, gossip, greed, injustice, drunkenness, and the folly of picking a quarrelsome woman for a wife, or of valuing outward beauty above godly character.

The recipe for building and living a successful life is no secret; the necessary ingredients are clearly delineated in God's book. If we are miserable and aware that our lives aren't working out very well, well maybe we need to check the recipe. It's a safe bet that we've left the wrong ingredients in or have left some of the right ingredients out. How to make life work is in the book: **It's all in the book.**

The recipe for our personal salvation and the recipe for successful living are both in the book. This book of recipes also has the recipe for building a God-honoring church. This is an important recipe, because I think we have been floundering with this over the past year of two. If I were to ask you the question "why are we here?" or "why does the Fourth Street Church of God exist?" or "what should the Fourth Street Church of God be doing?" I'm not sure we would all be on the same page. Even though our mission and vision statements are clearly printed in the bulletin each week, I think maybe there is a significant disconnect between the words on the page and the reality that lives in our hearts.

I'm going to say something here that may sound odd but think it through before you reject it. Our mission as a church and the vision of how we are going to accomplish that mission, are not up to us. If we are going after a mission that we've come up with or pursuing a mission according to our own vision of how it ought to be done, we're on the wrong page. Do you remember what I said about baking Betty Jane's birthday cake? I didn't do it from what I remembered seeing as a child. I didn't stir up some concoction from my own imagination. No sir. I went to the cookbook. I followed the recipe. I used the right ingredients. I obeyed the instructions. The cake was good because I followed the recipe.

What's the recipe for being a God-honoring church? What are the main

ingredients for being a church that God can and will use and bless for His glory? Here are the five main ingredients: First of all, **God must be our first love**. Jesus said, "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength." Our love for God is expressed through worship, giving, and obedience to His word. The number one thing we need to do as a church is to show an authentic love for God. The apostle John was instructed to write to the church at Ephesus and to warn them that they had forsaken their first love and to instruct them to repent and to do the things they did at first. **God must be our first love**.

A second ingredient in God's recipe for the church is to **love one another**. Jesus said, this is my command that you love one another. John 13:34-35, Romans 13:8, I Peter 1:22, I John 3:11 and 23, and 4:7, 11 and 12, and II John 1:5 all say the same thing: Jesus insists that his followers love one another. We are to gather together often, eat together, pray for one another, share with one another, encourage one another, enjoy one another. We are to laugh together and cry together, convincing the world that we are the disciples of Jesus because we love one another. We are here to love and worship God and **we are here to love one another**.

A third ingredient could be included in the first, but it is so important I give it its own place in the recipe this morning; the third ingredient is **holiness**. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." I Thessalonians 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality. . ." We have to face the truth that one of the reasons that the Church in the 21st century has lost people's respect, especially here in the United States, is that there has been one scandal after another. Priests have been discovering molesting altar boys, Pastors have run off with their secretaries, TV Evangelists have been found out visiting prostitutes and misusing money. And, the rank and file among church members have affairs, divorce their spouses, abuse their kids, use drugs and alcohol, and cheat on their taxes at about the same rate as those who don't go to church at all. We will never be perfect this side of heaven, but we need to have a higher standard than the world if we are going to honor the Lord. **If we would be a God-honoring church, we must pursue holiness**.

A fourth ingredient in the recipe for building a God-honoring church is **service to the least**. Perhaps you remember the words of Jesus: from Matthew 25:40 "In as much as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me." Jesus was talking about giving water to the thirsty, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick, visiting those in prison. Sometimes we may feel the urge to distance ourselves from the very needy. We may prefer to keep our hands clean and to avoid dealing with anyone who takes us out of our comfort zone or requires our compassion. We want to preserve our precious time, talents, and resources for ourselves.

But this instinct to preserve ourselves runs counter to the cross of Jesus. Those who follow Jesus will always be found on the front lines of pouring themselves out for others. They share the wisdom of Mother Theresa, who could see the face of Jesus in the poorest of the poor and recognized that He lives most visibly among the dying. **We serve Christ when we serve the most needy among men**.

The God-honoring church will worship the Lord, love one another, pursue holiness, and serve "the least of these His brethren." Last but not least, the God-honoring church will always be **seeking the lost**. Jesus said, "I came to seek and to save that which was lost." Jesus told His followers, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature," and make "disciples of all nations."

Something happened last Sunday that brought joy to my heart and confidence in the future of our church. Several people had invited friends to come with them to worship, and those friends came. Now, I'm not saying those particular friends were lost or just lonely for a church they could believe in, but whichever the case the point is they were invited. You were reaching out to others. If we are going to be a church that honors God, we need to maintain and ramp up our passion for the lost. All people matter to God and need to be a part of a church they can believe in. The God-honoring church will have a heart for the lost at home and a heart for reaching the lost throughout the world. Let us **always seek those who are lost**.

So whether you want to know how to receive personal salvation, or how to live a successful life, or how we can build a God-honoring church, the recipes are in the book. Let's pay attention to God's recipes.

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I Kings 17:7-16

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