

FOOD THAT LASTS

John 6:22-29

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, June 15, 2008

Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" (Jn. 6:28-29).

One of the mistakes made by many churches today is to assume that ministry success can be measured by raw numbers of people. Practically all that matters to some Christians is the size of their worship congregation. Many people believe, therefore, that the primary job of a pastor is to fill the sanctuary with as many people in the shortest amount of time.

This is mistaken for two reasons. First, it is directly contrary to the example of Christ. John 6 tells of Jesus' interaction with the crowd who followed after his miraculous feeding. The people were excited about what Jesus had done and wanted him to be their king. But Jesus left them because he did not offer what they wanted. Then, after Jesus had preached his gospel, the crowd left Jesus, because they did not want what he offered.

Today's emphasis on numbers is also mistaken because Jesus cares greatly about peoples' motives. He was not then, and is not now, interested in large crowds who come for the wrong reasons. J. C. Ryle comments, "The Lord Jesus, we should never forget, is still the same... He reads the secret motives of all who profess and call themselves Christians. He knows exactly why they do all they do in their religion. The reasons why they go to church... are all naked and opened to the eyes of the great Head of the Church."¹

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), I:347-348.

This suggests an important question for us today. Why do we call ourselves Christians? What are seeking from Christ and his Church? In this passage, Jesus tells us about the food the spoils, the food that lasts, and the one thing that God really wants from us.

FOOD THAT SPOILS

John 6 began with Jesus' miracle of feeding the five thousand. When we last saw this crowd, they were calling for Jesus to be made their king. Jesus, however, withdrew from them and went to be alone with God. While he was on the mountain praying, he sent his disciples into a storm in their boat, and having walked on the water to meet them, he brought them safely to their destination.

But the crowd, meanwhile, was mystified how Jesus could have gotten away, since they "saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone" (Jn. 6:21). When other boats arrived, the people "got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?'" (Jn. 6:24-25).

If we think Jesus was pleased by this pursuit, we are surprised to find that he was not. The reason is that they had failed to grasp the point of Jesus' miracle. It is true that Jesus fed them out of compassion for their physical needs. But the miracle was not intended merely to show Jesus as a provider of consumer goods and services. The point was to reveal him as the Son of God to whom they should look for their souls' salvation. One commentator states, "Instead of seeing in the bread the sign, they had seen in the sign only the bread."²

There was a reason why the crowd failed to see Jesus for what he was, and it is a reason that is still prevalent today. Jesus explained, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (Jn. 6:26). In other words, they were materialists. Leon Morris writes, "They had not reflected on the spiritual significance of the sign they had seen... They were moved not by full hearts, but by full bellies."³

² Lange, cited by Frederick L. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1893), 2:18.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Revised) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 317.

It is only natural for people to seek to have their earthly needs met, and the Bible never condemns this in its proper place. God filled the world with good things and the Bible teaches that God will take care of those who trust in him (see Mt. 6:25-34). So the problem was not a simple concern for physical well-being, but rather a materialistic attitude that pushed aside spiritual priorities.

All through the Bible we find examples of those who are ruined by materialism. When Joshua led Israel into the Promised Land, Achan sinned against God by stealing silver, gold, and a garment that had been dedicated to the Lord. Achan's sin caused Israel to lose its next battle, and brought judgment on him and his family. Later, King Solomon wrecked his spiritual life by lust for money and sexual pleasure; that one so renowned for wisdom should fall to these temptations should warn us against our own danger. In the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Lord about money and were judged. Lastly, we should note the example of this great crowd who witnessed Jesus' miraculous feeding, but were so consumed by their material drives that they paid no attention to the spiritual truths revealed by the miracle.

Materialism encroaches not merely on individuals, but also on churches. This is one reason the medieval church went wrong, and it is happening again today. Recently, a mega-church in Texas drew crowds by raffling off a free house, apparently accepting that people will only worship God when he offers worldly goods. Even worse is the so-called "prosperity gospel" preached by many today, falsely teaching that God guarantees worldly riches to those who truly believe. One has to wonder, with all the worldly excitement drawing crowds to churches today, how many would come if Christianity were suddenly made illegal and they faced arrest. It is always when the worldly veneer is stripped away, and especially when there is a price to be paid, that we discover the true followers of Christ.

Not only does materialism turn us away from more important spiritual concerns, but it also fails to satisfy men and women who were made for fellowship with God. This is why Jesus adds: "Do not labor for the food that perishes." By "food that perishes" he was referring to all the fleeting pleasures of this life. William Barclay notes that it was this problem that caused ancient Rome to decay: "The luxury of

Roman society was unparalleled.... They served feasts of peacocks' brains and nightingales' tongues... meals costing thousands of pounds were commonplace." He tells us that one Roman lady was married in a robe so richly jeweled that it cost the equivalent of millions of dollars. Barclay concludes, "There was a reason for all this, and the reason was a deep dissatisfaction with life, a hunger that nothing could satisfy. They would try anything for a new thrill, because they were both appallingly rich and appallingly hungry."⁴

If that sounds familiar, it is because our own society offers the best modern parallel. America enjoys a wealth that even ancient Rome never knew. But Americans have seldom been more unhappy, so that depression and suicide rates are at all-time highs. The proof that material things do not satisfy is our constant need for more. The size and price of trophy homes sky-rockets every year. New toys and pleasures are constantly invented, and our society increasingly knocks down moral taboos in pursuit of sinful thrills. Why? Not because materialism and sensuality satisfy, but because they do not. Jesus warns us, "Do not labor for the food that perishes" (Jn. 6:27).

FOOD THAT LASTS

One reason we should not pursue food that spoils is that Jesus offers us food that lasts. This is what Jesus spoke about next: "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" (Jn. 6:27). He meant eternal life – the life of a renewed spirit that enjoys the blessing of God forever. Not only does Jesus give such spiritual food, but he went on to teach, "The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn. 6:33). Jesus is himself the bread that feeds our souls; to know and trust and walk with him is to be satisfied with life from God.

This teaches an essential spiritual principle. Jesus said, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life" (Jn. 6:27). Jesus meant that spiritual blessing must be placed before material blessing. In the Sermon on the Mount, he made a similar point: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), I:212.

these things will be added to you” (Mt. 6:33). This means that our first priority must be to be right with God and to pursue the things of his heavenly kingdom. Are you right with God? If you do not have God’s blessing, no earthly goods will either satisfy or endure. But if you turn to God, not only will he provide your material needs, but your greater, spiritual needs will also be met.

Let me put this yet another way. Do you realize that your great need is not to be successful, or rich, or secure in worldly things? Of course you want to be happy. But the Christian knows that true happiness comes only through fellowship with God. “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” Jesus taught, “for they” – and they alone – “shall be satisfied” (Mt. 5:6). Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

The great tragedy of the world is that, though it gives itself to seek for happiness, it never seems to be able to find it... We are not to hunger and thirst after blessedness; we are not to hunger and thirst after happiness. But that is what most people are doing. We put happiness and blessedness as the one thing that we desire, and thus we always miss it; it always eludes us. According to the Scriptures happiness is never something that should be sought directly; it is always something that results from seeking something else.

That something else is righteousness. Lloyd-Jones concludes: “They alone are truly happy who are seeking to be righteous. Put happiness in the place of righteousness and you will never get it.”⁵

How important this is in light of the brevity of our present lives. Jesus told a parable about a rich fool. He owned great lands and crops and storehouses, without a thought for God or the needs of others. One day he spoke to his soul: “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But reality soon came crashing down. “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’” Jesus concluded, “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Lk. 12:19-21).

This does not make it sinful to possess wealth. If God has given you material blessings, you should be thankful to him and hold your wealth in stewardship for his service. If you are “rich toward God,”

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Expositions on the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959). 2:75

you will delight to use your money to do good and especially to spread the gospel. But the spiritual poverty of Christians today is amply demonstrated by how few know anything of tithing, much less of truly sacrificial giving. With the luxuries we enjoy and the money at our disposal, the church should never lack for its needs and our missions works should extend far and wide in extending the gospel.

Jesus' chief point is not about our money, however, but about the priority we should place on spiritual things. He says we should "labor... for the food that endures to eternal life" (Jn. 6:27). Arthur Pink comments: "The word 'labour'... signifies that men should be in deadly earnest over spiritual things; that they should spare no pains to obtain that which their souls so imperatively need."⁶ What are the labors that result in true spiritual benefit? J. C. Ryle elaborates:

We must read our Bibles, like men digging for hidden treasures. We must wrestle earnestly in prayer, like men contending with a deadly enemy for life. We must take our whole heart to the house of God, and worship and hear like those who listen to the reading of a will. We must fight daily against sin, the world, and the devil, like those who fight for liberty... This is "labouring." This is the secret of getting on about our souls.⁷

Jesus promises that those who seek spiritual blessings from him will not be disappointed. Having urged us to spiritual labor, he adds a promise that "the Son of Man will give [them] to you" (Jn. 6:27). This promise ensures that our spiritual efforts will not fail to be blessed with the food "that endures to eternal life."

This was the true message of his miracle of feeding the five thousand. Jesus explains, "For on him God the Father has set his seal" (Jn. 6:27). A seal marked one's ownership or approval, and Jesus has the Father's seal of approval as our Savior. Taking five loaves and two small fish in his hands, and lifting up his face to pray to the Father, Jesus was able to feed a crowd of over five thousand people. What more could he have done to prove that he is the One who brings satisfaction to the world and that, as Ryle puts it: "God the Father... has sealed, commissioned, designated, and appointed the Son of Man, the Incarnate Word, to be the Giver of everlasting life to man."⁸

⁶ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 313.

⁷ Ryle, 1:349-350.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1:356.

THE WORK OF GOD

Jesus' words must have made an impression, because his hearers responded with an important question: "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" (Jn. 6:28). The point is clearer in the Greek text, in which the same word is used by Jesus for "labor" and the people by "works." Jesus said they should labor for the food that brings eternal life, so they asked what that labor is.

In one respect, this is an excellent question, and one that is always blessed in the Bible with a straight answer. It is the question the rich young ruler asked of Jesus: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mk. 10:17). It is the question the Philippian jailor asked the apostle Paul: "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). It is the question every man or woman should be asking of God.

But in another respect, the question reveals a problem with mankind. They wanted to know what "works" they could do to receive God's blessing. They wanted to do something that would merit eternal life. James Boice explains the problem:

The human mind is always flattered when it is conscious of doing something for God. What is more, for his doings man considers himself entitled to a reward. How pleased we should all be if we could only earn salvation! In that case we would have succeeded in bringing God into the humbling position of being in debt to us, and we would love it. But this is not the way of salvation.⁹

Why not? What is wrong with works as a way of salvation? The answer is that there is nothing wrong with works, if you can do them sufficiently. This is how man wants to be saved: by fulfilling a quest, working good deeds, or offering religious acts of piety. The problem is that sinful mankind is not able to meet the perfect and holy God's standard of good works. The Lord looks on the heart and sees that all our works are corrupted by mixed motives and sin. Isaiah lamented, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6). God does not grade on a curve, but according to his own glorious perfections. "Be holy," he commands, "for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). Unfortunately for those

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:470.

who seek salvation by works, we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Another problem with works is that they are all undone by a single sin. If we want to stand before God in a righteousness of our own making, then it must be a spotless righteousness. So let me say to anyone who seriously believes he can commend himself to God by works: What about your sins? Do you seriously claim you have never violated God’s law? Because of our sins, and because even our good works are imperfect and polluted, we cannot be saved by works.

How, then, are we to be saved? Jesus answers with one of the great statements in this Gospel: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn. 6:29). Although Jesus describes believing as “the work of God,” his point is to contrast works with faith. The question is what God has appointed for our salvation, and the answer is faith in the Savior he has sent, Jesus Christ.

This teaches the great gospel truth of salvation through faith in Christ alone. God in his grace has provided a Savior, who p what we could never do. Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law on behalf of those who trust in him, then dying on the cross to pay for our sins. Jesus then rose from the dead to grant eternal life to those who believe. This salvation is by grace: Jesus said, “the Son of Man will give [eternal life] to you” (Jn. 6:27). So when he advises us to labor for food that does not perish, his meaning is that we should attend to God’s Word so as to believe in him. Christ offers eternal life not as something we earn, but as the gift of God’s grace, received through faith alone.

Does this mean there is no place for works in the Christian life? Not at all! It is not possible to enter to heaven without good works. Jesus saves us by faith alone, but that faith goes on to do good works; good works validate our profession of faith. Without a changed life, our profession of faith is called into question. So faith is the source of all our good works. God calls us to believe in order to receive eternal life, and having thus received eternal life we will inevitably go on to do good works – not in order to be saved but because we are saved.

But no Christian relies on works to be counted righteous before God. Do you realize this? Are you willing to renounce your works to be saved through faith in Christ alone? Or do you still pander to your

pride, seeking a platform to boast before God? If so, then by your works you will either stand or fall – and you will fall. But if you confess your failure before God, acknowledge your sins, and look in faith to Jesus as the Savior sent from God, then you will receive the free gift of eternal life. This was Paul’s answer to the Philippian jailor. He asked, “What must I do to be saved?” The apostle replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). And God will have all the glory as you trust in his beloved Son.

READING THE SIGNS

This crowd followed Jesus only for the food that he could give, misreading the sign they had received. What about us? What are seeking from Christ and his church? Are seeking mere worldly fulfillment or excitement? Jesus warns us, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you” (Jn. 6:27). Secondly, “Why do we call ourselves Christians, and how do we seek the blessings Jesus has to give?” He answers, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (Jn. 6:29).

Let us not imitate the folly of those who received Christ’s bread but not his salvation, but let us read the signs of Christ rightly. The sign God gives us today is the reading and hearing of his holy Word. Will you seek the true bread of eternal life? If so, the only way to receive God’s matchless gift of grace is to come humbly, renouncing your own merit, and worshiping and believing on the One whom God has sent.