

## **Come to Jesus for Life**

John 6:24-35

*by Michael G. Lilienthal*

Dear followers of Christ,

Why are you following Jesus? You see, these crowds who were following Jesus, many of whom had just been fed miraculously by him as part of the 5,000 who were given some of the five loaves and two fish, they did not really see the Giver, only the gift. Children are often guilty of this same thing, and, sad to say, so are many adults. You know how often children have to be reminded to say, "Thank you"? It's almost a joke. But we will also beam with joy when they say it without being prompted. These people were like ungrateful children. They had been given a gift, and, excited about it, they took it away, enjoyed it, and then came back demanding more. Jesus diagnoses this: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." They got a free meal, so they're coming back for another free meal. But they didn't see the "signs."

"Signs" doesn't mean just miracles. Signs are indicators of something else. Signs point to something, or represent something. Jesus didn't perform meaningless miracles. He performed signs, things that pointed to something else. These people saw the miracle, but didn't grasp the sign. The miracle was nothing more than a bit of food to keep people from being hungry for a day. But what Jesus wanted them to see was the food they could receive to keep them from being hungry for eternity.

## **I. Eternal, Not Temporal, Life**

Jesus was frustrated with these people, frustrated at their unwillingness to dig deeper into what they saw. Martin Luther in his day was frustrated with the same thing, noticing, “Even today the Gospel finds disciples who imagine that its teaching affords nothing but a gratification of the belly, that it brings all manner of earthly delights, and that it serves solely the wants of this temporal life,” and because of that, he said, “I have almost grown weary of preaching and teaching” (LW 23:5). There are times I also grow frustrated at this same thing, that people think that the Gospel should serve them now, should give them some sort of material comfort in this life. This is called “prosperity gospel,” and it’s a tool used by the devil, drawing them away from the true Gospel through their gluttony and their greed.

But here’s how sneaky that sort of gospel is, which is really no gospel at all: see, you can be equipped easily against the false gospel that teaches you to expect money, pleasure, material goods, because you have those clear passages that tell you, “You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). We know our hope isn’t in material goods. So we’re not going to be fooled by this false gospel.

But you’re not so easily equipped against the greyer shades of this false gospel: the drive to seek peace, friendship, love. Are you tempted to seek these benefits from the Gospel? Are any of these why you follow Jesus?

But wait, the Gospel promises peace: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace,” said the angels when Jesus was born (Luke 2:14)! And Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9). But he also said, “Do not think that I have come to bring

peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). He warned us, too, "And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place" (Matt. 24:6).

Friendship must be promised, though. Paul encourages us, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:1-2). But no, church is not a place for us to merely come and socialize, because Paul also says, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

But love, that is a true virtue of the Gospel. It is listed first in Paul's letter to the Galatians under "the fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience," etc. (Gal. 5:22). And Jesus even encourages: "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44). But again, he also says later, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:37).

Faith cannot be superficial. These crowds followed Jesus because they had "faith" that he could fill their bellies, maybe that he could overthrow the Roman government. In what is your faith? That you will have a peaceful church that will bury you when you die? That you'll have friends to visit each Sunday? That you've got a safe haven here in this building, where you can just relax, hear something you already know, not having to put forth any effort? Or do you have faith that here you will hear

about your Savior who died on a cross to pay for all your sins, and rose to new life to promise you eternal life, and that he brings you the forgiveness that he won through the very Word you hear here? Do you have faith that by hearing this Word you are nourished and strengthened, that you will learn more and more and grow in your faith? Do you have faith that here is given the bread of life from heaven which is for eternal life, the bread that you need to eat only once and you are fed for all eternity?

Why the world calls us fools: they cannot see the everlasting, and so perceive only the here and now; our faith does not bring wealth, comfort, it does not inspire true peace on earth, love to fellow-man, an end to suffering (not in the world's eyes). Therefore we are fools. But if anyone could be led to concern for the eternal, then it should be easy to let go the temporal, "the bread which perishes," in order to come to "the true bread from heaven."

## **II. Eating True, Heavenly Bread**

It's true that this bread needs to be eaten only once, because Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." See, eat once, and never go hungry again. Your faith that Jesus has saved you is enough. You have eternal life. But while we live on earth we are still in danger. The food that perishes still tempts. Satan wants us to think we need to make room in our stomachs for these other things we want, so he tries to get us to vomit up some of that heavenly bread. We don't really need that part that tells us that unbelievers are going to hell, right? We don't need that passage that talks about divorce, or sexual immorality. We don't need the bit that tells us to watch out for false teachers—I want to

have communion at my family's church: it's just a family thing, it doesn't mean anything, even if they teach things differently from my church.

Look at how these crowds kept pressing Jesus, not understanding what he was really trying to give them. Jesus told them, "Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life." They heard the word "labor" and responded, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" They thought they had to do something to be saved. They were familiar with the laws of Moses, so they tried to get something they could manage, something they could wrap their heads around. But Jesus said something clever in response. They asked how to do "the works of God," i.e., how to do the works that *God demanded*. But Jesus said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." He told them what the "work of God" was, i.e. the work which *God performed*. God provided the means of grace and faith. That's the work of God. The work of God is not what we must do, but what God has done.

But still they didn't get it. They thought that Jesus was still asking them to *do* something, specifically to have faith in him. And this was too much. They demanded a greater sign. "Moses did this great sign," they said. "He gave us manna from heaven. We dare you to do better."

But Jesus obliterates their paradigm, masterfully demonstrating to them the difference, the great chasm, between the earthly and the heavenly. "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Moses didn't give them heavenly bread. Sure, it came

down miraculously from the sky, but it still only fed them temporarily, only filled their bellies. True heavenly bread fills for eternity, as we've said.

They resisted Jesus' teachings at every turn: "Nope, nope, nope: this is what I'm comfortable with, so give me something to do with that; don't try to show me anything else." They were comfortable with the Law, and so could not handle the Gospel. This is how the whole world is: everyone is comfortable with the Law, because then it's in my control; I can do something about it. The Gospel appears on the scene and people think, "No, that's not reasonable. I know better. Let me do what I'm able to do."

So we have to come back to this true heavenly bread. Otherwise you'd only have to come to one sermon in your entire life. But no, you come back week by week, and you have your Bibles, and you read your family and personal devotions. These are good practices, because it strengthens us in the faith we already have. It's dangerous to avoid any additional teaching from God's Word. Assuming you've got your faith well in hand and that you can't go any deeper means that you won't, and that the foundation, left unattended, will weaken and crumble. Yes, have childlike faith. But don't assume that means a simplistic faith. Have you noticed that children aren't content with knowing just the basics? They may not enjoy all the subjects they're taught in school, but they love learning. Look at how children watch adults, and mimic their behaviors. Listen to how they speak, and how their speech starts to be patterned after things they've heard their parents say. Watch them play. They're soaking in the world around them, analyzing it, growing. That's true childlike faith: faith that holds

so joyfully to what it's been given that it wants to pick it apart, to look at it from every angle, to discover everything there is to learn about it.

That's what we're asked to do with the Gospel. Don't let it stagnate. Instead, realize this: we are blessed with the most glorious gift of forgiveness of all our sins, eternal life, and salvation, all on account of one man (who is also God) who died 2,000 years ago and rose from the dead three days later. This is such a delicious bread, know that you are blessed to be able to come back to it constantly, to taste it again and again. And this heavenly bread is true food that gives you eternal life.

Amen.