

“This Is the Work of God”

The Twenty-First in a Series of Sermons on the Gospel of John

Texts: John 6:22-35; Psalm 78:12-32

Using five small barely loaves and two dried fish, Jesus miraculously fed over five thousand people in the wilderness east of the Sea of Galilee. Later that same night when a sudden storm blew in on the Sea, Jesus walked across the water and joined his frightened disciples in their boat, and immediately calmed the storm. These two miracles reveal that Jesus is a new Moses who is leading his people in a New Exodus. Just as YHWH fed the Israelites in the wilderness of the Sinai, so too, Jesus has fed the people in a wilderness in Galilee. And just as the Psalmist spoke of YHWH as Lord of sea and storm, so too Jesus walked across the water and commanded the winds. These two miracles reveal much about who Jesus is, and together they serve as the backdrop for Jesus to tell us more about who he is and the nature of his mission, which he does in the so-called “bread of life” discourse recorded in John 6:26-58. One of the most profound sections of our Lord’s teaching in the entire New Testament, the “bread of life” discourse is also one of the most difficult for Jesus’ audience to accept—not because they do not understand Jesus, but rather, because they do. The things Jesus has to say in this discourse are so difficult to accept, that many among the crowds who have been following Jesus do so no more, and even his most trusted disciples are tempted to walk away.

As we resume our series on the Gospel of John, and we are working our way through John 6. On the last two Lord’s Days, we have covered each of the two miracles (vv. 1-21), which set the stage for the teaching discourse which follows the next day. According to John’s account, huge crowds have been following Jesus wherever he goes throughout the Galilee region, many following Jesus out into the wilderness east of the sea of Galilee without food, and where Jesus miraculously fed over five thousand people. Jesus left the area after night fell, because he knew that those in the crowds who had identified him as the prophet predicted by Moses, now desired to make him king—even by force, should he refuse. The disciples got back into their boat, and headed west across the sea of Galilee so as to return to Capernaum, only to be caught in a storm. They were frightened, John says, when they saw someone walking across the water toward them. They were greatly comforted when they realized it was Jesus, who then joined them in their boat.

Meanwhile, the crowds who had been out in the wilderness spent the night searching for Jesus and are quite surprised to find him the next morning in the synagogue in Capernaum. How did Jesus get there so fast, since it was obvious (or so they thought) that the disciples had left the east side of the sea without Jesus? With people searching everywhere for him throughout the night, how did he get to Capernaum without anyone knowing? The chaotic scene is described in verses 22-25, “*on the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea 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. Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves 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?”*”

As Jesus begins the discourse which follows, there are several things to keep in mind. It has been clear throughout this passage so far that the people were right to make the connection between Moses (who foretold of a great prophet to come) and Jesus. But it is also clear that the multitudes were seeking Jesus

for all the wrong reasons. Jesus says as much in verse 26, the opening line of the “bread of life” discourse. “*Jesus answered them, `Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.`*” The crowds were not following Jesus because they knew themselves to be sinners in need of a Savior. They followed Jesus because he could perform miracles. He could heal the sick. He cast out demons with but a word. He can feed them.

Yet, as we will see in the discourse which follows, Jesus did not come to be a walking emergency room or a fast food establishment. While it is important to realize that God does care about us, our health, and the needs of life, Jesus came not to address the symptoms of Adam’s fall. Jesus came to deal with the root cause of all human suffering—the guilt and consequences of our sin. Jesus came to bring the people eternal life and deliverance from God’s wrath. But the multitudes following him wanted more food—“*their fill of the loaves*” as Jesus puts it. They wanted to be delivered from sickness and suffering. They wanted someone to raise an army, and take on the Romans. And they wanted another meal.

But Jesus didn’t come to do any of those things. He came as a New Moses to lead the people of God in a New Exodus—an Exodus not from bondage in Egypt under a Pharaoh, or even from a military occupation by the Romans. Jesus came to deliver God’s people from the guilt and power of sin, and in the discourse which follows, he will use a powerful and well-known biblical metaphor to make his point. He will identify himself as the living bread who came down from heaven, and that whoever feeds on this bread (his crucified flesh) will have everlasting life. And as he says this, keep in mind that the day before, Jesus fed over five-thousand people out in the wilderness—in an event of biblical proportions.

Before we go through the “bread of life” discourse in detail, it may help to consider that there are three main ways in which Christians have understood the discourse which follows. The first of these views is the so-called “sacramental view.” Those who hold this view contend that since John does not include in his Gospel an account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the so-called Upper Room discourse (beginning in chapter 13), and since the Lord’s Supper was such an important part of the life of the church when John wrote his Gospel at some point after the Fall of Jerusalem, John chose to explain and describe the sacrament at this point in his Gospel (right after the feeding of the five-thousand). This is the view held by most current commentators, and even a number of church fathers, such as Ignatius.

But the problems with the sacramental view are significant enough that most Reformed and evangelical commentators reject the sacramental view, usually on three grounds. First, if this view is true, then Jesus gives the “bread of life” discourse likely a year before his actual passion (in the synoptic gospels, the celebration of the “Last Supper” occurs on the eve of the next Passover, a full year later). Critical scholars (who do not think John’s Gospel always reflects actual historical events) argue that John puts this discourse here because of the significance of the Supper to the early church—in other words, John stuck the story here because it fits with the feeding of the five-thousand. While the Lord’s Supper was very important to the early church, are we really to believe the critical scholars when they claim that John makes the discourse up, or else moves sayings of Jesus around in his Gospel solely to make a theological point, even if Jesus said these words in some place other than in Capernaum? I don’t think so.

Second, as we have just indicated, Jesus gives this discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum before a group of people who are either hostile to his message (the Jews), or who do not believe his message, nor understand the nature of his mission (the crowds and his own disciples). It is hard to believe that this would be an appropriate setting for Jesus to introduce a sacrament of such importance to the life of the church, if those present do not believe in him, and will reject his teaching as soon as he gives it.

The third reason is key, however, as to why the sacramental view is to be rejected. In verse 53, Jesus speaks in an absolute sense about eating his body and drinking his blood. “*So Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’*” The language Jesus uses is absolute, and in light of the things Jesus will say elsewhere in this discourse, it is impossible to believe that John is telling us that in order to receive eternal life, we must partake of Christ’s body and blood in and through the sacrament. Taking this point to its logical conclusion (i.e., taking Jesus’ words literally, without interpreting them against the backdrop of redemptive history which Jesus himself sets forth) explains why the Orthodox churches, for example, commune infants, so that should they die, they will be saved.

The sacramental view also overlooks the critical fact that our Lord’s point about eating and drinking is clarified in verses 29, 35, 40, and 47, when Jesus speaks of faith in his person and work as the absolute means by which eternal life is received.¹ In my view, the sacramental interpretation is untenable.

A second view is the so-called “spiritual view” (which is often overtly anti-sacramentarian). On this view it is understood that Jesus makes no reference whatsoever in the discourse to the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. According to the “spiritual view” John is talking about the necessity of receiving the spiritual realities of which Jesus is speaking (his body and blood) by faith. Eating and drinking only refers to entering into union with Christ, but does not in any sense refer to the sacrament. The weakness of this view is that Christians reading or hearing our Lord’s words surely would think of the Lord’s Supper. And if, as those who hold this view argue, John’s Gospel was written to non-Christians (solely for the purpose of evangelizing them), then it supposedly would not matter that Jesus may speak as though he is referring to the sacraments, when he really is not. It is also argued that the spiritual view might even fit with the setting in Capernaum—where Jesus is talking to people who do not believe the promise and for whom the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is not even on the radar.

A third view, and the one which I think makes the most sense of the passage, is the so-called “Christological” interpretation. On this view, Jesus is indeed speaking of trusting in his life-giving flesh for salvation—when he speaks of this life-giving flesh, he is not referring to the sacrament *per se*, but to his death upon the cross. Calvin points out that “the sermon does not refer to the Lord’s Supper, but to the continual communication which we have apart from the reception of the Supper” (i.e., our union with Christ through faith by which we feed upon him, as it were). But as Calvin goes on to say, “the Lord’s Supper corresponds to this teaching,” i.e., we eat his flesh and drink his blood by faith.²

Reformed Christians believe that the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper are the visible signs and seals of that same body Jesus offered for us upon the cross, and which was raised from the dead, and then ascended into heaven. Therefore, we feed on Jesus by faith when we trust in him as the source of all spiritual life, and again, through faith when we come to the Lord’s table. In the original context of the discourse, and in light of the purpose of John writing this Gospel, on this interpretation non-Christians would be forced to deal with Jesus’ claims to be the only source of eternal life. Jews would be forced to come to terms with their own redemptive history (and with the fact that Jesus is claiming to be one with YHWH). But Christians reading and hearing these words later on would very likely see in them the fact that although Jesus is making gospel promises (and the absolute language associated with eating and

¹ Morris, The Gospel According to John, 351-353.

² Calvin, The Gospel According to St. John, 1. 169-171.

drinking clearly does refer to trusting in Jesus through faith), nevertheless, at the same time, Jesus' words prefigure the sacrament of the Lord's Supper yet to be instituted when Jesus spoke these words a year before the Last Supper (on the next Passover) and the institution of the sacrament itself. As one writer puts it, "John 6 is not about the Lord's Supper; rather, the Lord's Supper is about what is described in John 6."³ That, I think is the best way to understand this discourse in relation to the Lord's Supper.

Having exposed the fact that the crowds followed Jesus to Capernaum because their bellies were full and their hearts were hard, we pointed out last time that Jesus never does answer the first question put to him about when he arrived in Capernaum and entered the synagogue. But there is no question that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand and the fervor with which the people were seeking him stands in the background of every word which follows. Based upon Jesus' rebuke in verse 26, no one looked beyond the miracle and the vast amount of food Jesus provided, to that to which the miracle pointed—that in the person of Jesus, God was calling forth a New Exodus. Through the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God was advancing. The miraculous meal (especially the bread) was symbolic of that once for all sacrifice which Jesus will make upon the cross to save us from our sins. It is also interesting to consider that the lectionary reading for the Passover was Exodus 16 (about manna from heaven) and Isaiah 54, which speaks of being taught by God. All of these things set the stage for the discourse which follows.

We should not be surprised when in verse 27, Jesus continues his non-answer of the crowds' question (betraying their lack of interest in the true purpose of his mission) by giving the "bread of life" discourse which runs from verse 26 through verse 58. Jesus begins by addressing the crowds (along with the disciples') collective short-sighted and faithless response to the miracle he had performed the day before in the wilderness. Jesus warns them "*do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you.*" With these words, Jesus is telling us to look beyond the fish and loaves, to another type of food which will not spoil or perish. In fact, the kind of food Jesus will offer endures eternally (or better, unto eternal life). Identifying himself as the Son of Man (Jesus' favorite self-designation and a reference to the heavenly figure in Daniel 7:13 ff), Jesus tells those in the synagogue that the bread he will give them (note the future tense) is something for which they are to work (in the sense of "striving"). Ironically, the way to "strive" for this food is to realize that only the Son of Man can give it, and it must be received by faith.

As if these words were not shocking enough—Jesus identifying himself with the heavenly figure of Daniel 7, and promising some sort of food tied to eternal life—Jesus goes on to say of himself, "*for on him God the Father has set his seal.*" Jesus is declaring that he is the divine agent of YHWH, who has been commissioned by God to give this food to those who strive for it. In other words, God has sent Jesus to give such food, and it is to this food which does not perish that the miracle of the loaves had pointed.

Sadly, though we should not be surprised by this, the people hearing Jesus speak once again miss the point of his words, not catching the obvious fact that he would give a kind of food that endures to eternal life. As good Jews, trained by legalistic and self-righteous Pharisees, the people in the synagogue listening intently, focus on Jesus' comment about "striving" and then ask the question recorded in verse 28. "*Then they said to him, 'What must we do, to be doing the works of God?'*" Jesus has spoken of what he would give them, what he will do. But they want to know how much striving they must do to get more of the food he has been talking about. The question is very much like that asked by the Samaritan woman at the well when Jesus told her about the living water (cf. John 4:15), and she then wondered how

³ Cited in; Carson, The Gospel According to John, 280.

she could get such water so that she would not have to go to the well every day to draw more. Jesus is speaking of heavenly things, but apart from faith, people cannot grasp the meaning of Jesus' words.

Jesus' answer to this question frames the rest of the discourse. In verse 29, "*Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'*" If the people want to know what work they must do to obtain the bread that endures, Jesus plainly tells them—believe on (or in) the one whom God sent (Jesus), and upon whom God's seal (approval) rests as evidenced by the sign (the feeding of the five thousand) they have all just witnessed. Jesus is the one who reveals God to us, so we are to believe (trust) in him as the one whom God has sent.

It is vital that we understand that Jesus does not grant this living bread to those who strive hard enough to earn it as a reward. Rather, he gives this living bread to those who do what he requires—those who trust in him. "To believe" in this sense, is a technical term which means to reply upon another (trust). In this case, Jesus himself tells the crowds to trust that he is that one whom God has sent to give them eternal life. The work which God requires then, is to believe, or trust in Jesus. The expression as used by John is diametrically opposed to the phrase "works required by the law." In this sense then, what John says is indistinguishable from Paul's statement in Romans 3:28, "*for we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.*"⁴ Or as Augustine puts it: "This is to eat the meat . . . which endureth to eternal life. To what purpose dost thou make ready teeth and stomach? Believe, and thou hast eaten already."⁵

In the light of everything which has happened in the wilderness and throughout Jesus' public ministry, the Jews respond to Jesus' words by demanding yet another a sign, this time something which will prove that he is greater than Moses. After all, Moses fed the Israelites, and Jesus had done the same. Moses was a prophet, Jesus may be one too. But the claims to deity and the demand to trust in him lead many in the crowd to want more proof—a reasonable request, given Jesus' claims. As we read in verses 30-31, "*So they said to him, 'Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*" The good news in their question is that the people have made the connection between Jesus, his feeding of the five thousand, and the account of the Israelites in the wilderness of the Sinai, who were sustained by God's miraculous provision of manna. The wording of their question is taken directly from the words of Psalm 78:24 (which we read as part of our Old Testament lesson).

Given the crowds' misguided desire to make Jesus king, and given the fact that Jesus knows their hearts are hard, to perform any miraculous sign at this time on demand would be an act which caters to the whims of sinful people who cannot see the truth even though truth incarnate is speaking to them in the flesh. This would only harden them in their desire to make Jesus king. Jesus responds by directing them from their preoccupation with Moses and manna, back to YHWH, who was the one who actually provided the Israelites with the heavenly bread, not Moses. In verse 32, "*Jesus then said to them, '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.'*" The people have read Exodus 16, haven't they? They ask Jesus a question about manna using the words of Psalm 78. They know the words of Scripture, don't they? And since they do, then certainly they know it wasn't Moses who gave the Israelites bread from heaven (manna) which perished if not eaten. It was YHWH, to whom Jesus now refers as "my Father," who provided

⁴ Carson, The Gospel According to John, 285.

⁵ Cited in: Morris, The Gospel According to John, 351-353.,

bread for his people in the wilderness. Jesus not only corrects them as to their Bible knowledge, no doubt, he offends the Jews greatly by speaking of God as “his” Father.

The word of explanation for all of this comes from Jesus in verse 33. *“For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* The “bread from God” is a synonym for “bread from heaven,” and refers to the show bread used by the priests in Leviticus 21. But Jesus now uses this term of himself. He is that bread who comes down from heaven (in his incarnation) and gives life to the world (through his death, resurrection, and power to give life–regeneration). Jesus not only provides the people of God with bread from heaven, he is the bread from heaven. Notice too that Jesus does the unthinkable—at least as far as an orthodox Jew of that period is concerned. This bread gives life to the whole world (including Gentiles, like those who have oppressed the Jews), not just Israel. What matters, says Jesus, is not ethnicity, or even obedience to the laws of Moses. What matters is faith (trust) in the one who comes down from heaven. To trust in him is to receive the bread that gives eternal life.

Once again, the answer which comes from the people, reveals the degree of spiritual blindness of those present. According to verse 34, *“They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’”* The Jews in the synagogue in Capernaum were as spiritually blind as the Samaritan woman at the well had been. The people want bread that does not perish. They do not want what that bread symbolizes—the crucified body of Jesus, given for all of our sins. Jesus answers them by moving from metaphor to reality. *“Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’”* Just as he had told them in verse 29, when they asked what works must we do to receive this bread, so here, he speaks plainly, telling them that the only way they will receive the bread from heaven is by believing (trusting) in Jesus who is that bread, or to put it in theological terms, who is the only proper object of faith, that one in whom we must believe (trust) if we are to have eternal life (to feed upon that bread which endures to eternal life). Trusting in him satisfies all spiritual hunger and thirst.

With these words, we have the interpretive key to the whole of the bread of life discourse. But we also have the answer to life’s most important question. As for the way we interpret the discourse, it is clear that Jesus is not referring to receiving the Lord’s Supper as the means of receiving eternal life. He is telling the Jews present that he is living bread, the bread of life, who has come down from heaven, who will meet their deepest and most fundamental human need (deliverance from sin and the wrath of God) if only they get their minds off making him king, and instead see in him, the only Savior from sin. If they do this, they will receive eternal life and shall never hunger or thirst again.

As for those who ask the most important question in life, “what do I have to do to go to heaven?” Jesus gives us the answer—and it is not “try your hardest.” It is not “be nice.” Nor is it “be a good person.” It is not “undergo this ceremony,” or “perform that ritual.” It is not “do good works.” It is not even “do good works *and* believe in Jesus.” Jesus’ answer is very simple, straightforward, and sadly, hated by many, especially by “good” religious people. *“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.’”* The only way to heaven is through trust (faith) in Jesus Christ. How do we know this? Because when asked this question directly, this is how Jesus answered. What must I do? You must place your trust in Jesus Christ, who alone can save you from your sins, and who ensures that you will never hunger or thirst again . . .