

THE GOSPEL OF BELIEF - Studies in John's Gospel - Part twenty-three

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

ONLY CHRIST'S RULE ON HIS TERMS CAN MAKE OUR LIVES WHOLE

John 6:1-15 - "After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. [2] And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. [3] Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. [4] Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. [5] Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" [6] He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. [7] Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." [8] One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, [9] "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" [10] Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. [11] Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. [12] And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." [13] So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. [14] When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" [15] Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."

I have a longer introduction with a shorter sermon in tow.

It is hard to get a sense of the passing of time when reading the gospel accounts. The chapters flow quickly one after another and the events seems to happen with only brief moments between. In fact, about **one year** has passed since the healing of the lame man by pool at the beginning of chapter five. Taking the record of all the synoptics, the time between the healing of the lame man and the feeding of the five thousand was filled with various aspects of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, including many other miracles, the Sermon on the Mount, some of the early parables, and the first sending out in mission of the twelve two by two.

Also, the feeding of the five thousand is significant in John's gospel because it is the very first instance where John narrates an account that runs parallel with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John very rarely covers the same ground as the synoptics. He will not do this again until his final account of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

But there's still something unique in John's account. John's is the only record that specifically links the feeding of the five thousand to the time of the Passover - **John 6:4** - "**Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand.**" John wants us to know this. None of the synoptics mentions this detail. And the **reason** this matters to John is he is the only one who will follow up the feeding of the five thousand with such an extended account of Jesus Himself as the "**bread of life**" in the last half of this chapter.

In other words, John wants this visible picture of physical bread filling up the emptiness of the crowds' stomachs to vivify Jesus Christ, the fulfillment of all that the Passover pointed to, filling up the spiritual hunger of those who would believe in Him. John records this "**bread miracle**" to lead into the words of Jesus in **John 6:33-35** - "**For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.**" [34] They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." [35] 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."

We'll say more about this in a few minutes.

Notice also one more opening thought. I think John means for us to contrast the two responses of the people to the last two miraculous signs in chapters five and six. When Jesus healed the lame man by the pool the people wanted to **kill** Jesus - **John 5:16-18** - "**And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.** [17] But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." [18] **This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.**"

Then, in the feeding of the five thousand, the people wanted to make Him their king on the spot - **John 6:14-15** - "**When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" [15] Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.**"

We learn there is more than one way to get Jesus wrong. In the one case they **hated** Him because He was **upsetting** them and in the other they **loved** Him without **understanding** Him. Consider these two responses well because they are repeated throughout Christendom today.

When people blunder their encounter with Jesus Christ they fall into one of these two camps. Those who resent Jesus and avoid Jesus do so because they quickly discover He never comes with **just** forgiveness. There is much in their enjoyable routines of life that He won't tolerate. They find the simple act of **"asking Jesus into their heart"** involves **throwing out the things that are presently in His space**. Stubborn people find they aren't as interested in Jesus as they thought.

Then there are those who go wild over Jesus. Like those in John chapter six - those who wanted to make Jesus their king - they see Him as the one who can constantly feed thousands with a couple loaves of bread. And who doesn't want a Jesus like that for king! And people come to Jesus as the great **problem solver** every minute in some church somewhere. After all, we certainly have enough messes that need a magical touch. Welcome king Jesus! And there are empty seats in churches all over Newmarket and Canada where the wildly hopeful used to sit. Jesus didn't take all their problems away. In fact, John says Jesus **separated Himself** from those who came with those false expectations - **John 6:15** - **"Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."**

1) **DEVOTE TO JESUS ALL THAT YOU HAVE, EVEN WHEN YOU KNOW IT ISN'T ANYWHERE NEAR ENOUGH**

John 6:5-9 - "Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" [6] He said this to test him, **for he himself knew what he would do.** [7] Philip answered him, **"Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."** [8] One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, [9] "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, **but what are they for so many?"**

I think the important words are found in **verse 6** - **"He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do."** This is important. John tells us Jesus had already **committed Himself** to performing this miracle **with** or **without** the faith of His disciples - **"He knew what he would do...."** Jesus **is** going to feed these hungry people.

But, judging from the space John devotes to Jesus' questioning of the disciples, we are clearly meant to learn the pattern of **involvement** - the **role** - of Philip and Andrew and all would-be followers of Jesus in facing situations where we don't see how what we have on hand can possibly be enough to meet some specific point of need.

And here's Jesus' teaching point. To His disciples He says, **"Give me what you have. Don't fail to start somewhere. There's no point in calculating only your shortfall - "...What are they among so many....?" (9b).**

This is Andrew doing his math. Philip did the same. "Five (or probably six) thousand people. Divided by two hundred denarii (several thousand dollars) equals x dollars per person equals not enough food to sustain them. And we don't have that much money anyway."

And church, I can't tell you how precious it is to me - it's emotional to me - to see Jesus - without telling them **in advance** what He was going to do - to see Jesus lovingly encouraging His disciples by saying, **"Just have the people sit down. Come on, let's just start. Get the loaves and the fish. Let's just start together."**

That is always the voice of Jesus. This is how you can recognize Jesus talking to your heart in a tough situation. The disciples in John's account would **never** have started out with that boy's lunch on their own. And you may find yourself in a situation today where you can't imagine seeing through all that God would draw you into in terms of dedication, repentance, commitment, and fruitfulness. You have **no inclination** to start out to wholeness anymore.

But then there's the voice of Jesus. You can always recognize it. The voice of Jesus always deals in the **present tense**. It's the voice that says **"Come on, just start. Don't look at those five thousand mouths to feed. Don't look way off to all those people still in that back row. You're not there yet. Just look at the first mouth in the first row. You can do that. You can start. Trust me. Don't let your own fear or bitterness or doubt keep you from starting. Take the first step. You have this one critical moment. Use it now."**

This is so simple and yet so crippling when missed. The Devil causes thousands of Christians to freeze in their present low condition simply by leading them to postpone or neglect listening to the call of God's Spirit because they can't imagine reaching the **challenging end** of that call rather than simply taking the **first step** of obedience.

Don't miss this. *Emerson* once said, **"The great illusion and lie is that this present hour is not the critical, decisive hour - that there is another hour in the future that counts more than this one."** Remember, now is the time to start with what you have. I know it isn't enough. But place it in Jesus' hands and start right now.

Our second point is the logical follow-up to the first:

2) **WHILE OUR OWN WORKS ARE WICKED AND PROUD WHEN USED TO EARN GOD'S FAVOR, OUR OBEDIENCE IN RESPONSE TO CHRIST'S CALL IS WHAT ENGAGES DIVINE POWER ON OUR BEHALF**

John 6:10-13 - "Jesus said, **"Have the people sit down."** Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. [11] Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. [12] And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, **"Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost."** [13] So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.

While John is correct in pointing out it was Jesus Himself who began the distribution process we know from the synoptics that He actually involved the disciples in the distribution as well - **Matthew 14:19** - **"Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds."**

This process is repeated too many times in the gospels to be coincidental. The disciples organize the crowd. The disciples distribute the bread. The disciples collect the fragments. The disciples prepare the room for the Passover supper. Jesus gets others to remove the stone from the grave of Lazarus.

The fact is it is usually the way Jesus worked. He involved His disciples in the **little works** that prepared the way for His **big works**. A **pattern** is laid out and this feeding miracle is no exception. Don't picture the disciples starting out with a huge supply of already multiplied bread and fish. Probably the better picture is seeing the bread and the fish **kept multiplying after the first row or two was fed**.

In other words, there never **appeared to be enough bread** right to the back row. The action of the disciples was always and continuously generated by ongoing trust and obedience. It was only at the **end of the process** - after the twelve baskets of fragments was collected - that the abundance of divine provision was manifested.

This is the difference between **faith** and **magic**. We learn that our Lord will almost **always** work in such a way that we are constantly encouraged to **abide in Him**. People who lust after **huge trouble-eliminating blessings** from Jesus so they can go on their merry way will never live very close to the kind of kingdom Jesus wants to bring to them.

This second point is to teach us to look for the relationship between **what we are asking Jesus to do for us** and **what are we doing in obedience to commit to His rule in our present situation**. And this brings us right to the edge of our final point:

3) **YOU CAN HAVE A LOT OF ACCURATE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT WHO JESUS IS AND YET BE TOTALLY WRONG ABOUT WHAT HE'S TRYING TO DO**

John 6:14-15 - "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" [15] **Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."**

They were right on many points. Jesus was indeed the predicted prophet to come in **Deuteronomy 18:15**. And Jesus did come as the promised Messiah. And He did come to establish a kingdom. He told the people He had come to set them free. And He had shown them many confirming signs of His power.

The people were **right** to be very excited about Jesus, the Christ. And yet they were also terribly wrong. They were right about who Jesus **was** but wrong about what He had come to **do**. So they were wrong on the **application** of what they knew about Jesus. The result was they were excited about who Jesus **was** and were at cross-purposes with His **presence**. You might say they understood the **surface** of the Christ, but not the **center**.

This is a common problem today. How many people do you know who say something like this - ***"I'm finished with Christianity. I'm mad at God. He let me down. I brought my situation to Him and He didn't help one bit. Christianity is a scam. It doesn't work."***

It is very easy, if you're not careful, to lay a whole foundation for your faith that is cracked and ill-formed. If you have the wrong **expectation** of the **kind of kingdom** Jesus wants to establish you will be wrong on your whole outlook of what your walk with Christ is supposed to look like.

The Kingdom of Christ - the **rule** of Christ - in your life and mine is a **moral rule**. It's the rule of **His will**, not the rule of **pleasant, happy circumstances**. It is a rule designed to **overthrow all that is sinful and opposed to the glory of God**.

O, there is a day coming, not here yet, when this rule will be a visible, physical rule where all the **marks of the Fall** will be forever banished. It will be a rule where none will be **allowed** to oppose His will. The curse of sickness, death, war, and all of the millions of petty expressions of self will be cast into the lake of fire.

But for now the kingdom is a rule of **Christ's will** over **my own**. And there is incredible joy to be found here and now. But it's a joy that **follows** those first steps of obedience. And it's a joy that **grows** as we continue abiding in Christ rather than our own self-pursuits.

Do you see those words in **verse 15?** - **"Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him *by force to make him king*, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself."**

You can't **force Jesus** into your kingdom. He only rules in His. And, at times, He may actually remove Himself from our sense of His presence until we learn the hard way to receive Him on His own terms rather than ours. The sooner that lesson is learned, the greater our joy will be.