John 6 *The Grave Robber: Where to Find Bread*

***From One Beggar To Another…***

It was cold. So cold.

Sam pulled his coat tighter and reached for another piece of trash.

It had been four weeks since the stock market had crashed and his office had been abruptly closed. Four fruitless weeks of walking the streets looking for a job that didn’t exist. One of thousands of unemployed men in a 1929 economy that simply wasn’t hiring.

Then, about a week ago, Sam came home to find the locks to his apartment changed. His landlord had grown tired of waiting for the rent, and now Sam found himself living on the street wearing his only suit and a threadbare overcoat. He was literally down to the clothes on his back.

And he was cold.

And hungry.

Sam wanted to keep looking for work, but he found more and more of his time consumed with the search for food. The lines at the soup kitchens were endless; and the two times he’d made it to the serving tables the slop he’d received had been more like dishwater than soup. So now he was actually sifting through trash bins in the forlorn hope that somebody had thrown out something half-way edible. He couldn’t believe how far his life had fallen.

As he tossed aside another stomach-turning pile of garbage, Sam heard a noise in the alleyway. Startled, he looked up to see a man shuffling toward him. He had the look of a veteran of the streets. He had a thick mane of gray hair and a wildly tangled beard. He was wearing three coats with a tattered blanket over top for good measure. There was an unwashed smell coming off him. Shabby wasn’t a strong enough word to describe him.

When he spoke, his voice was more animal growl than human speech. “Follow me,” he muttered. And then shuffled around the corner.

It wasn’t much of an invitation, but Sam didn’t have any better prospects. So he left the dumpster and followed the vagrant. Together they wound through a dizzying maze of side streets and back alleys; until, finally, the bum stopped behind a non-descript warehouse type of building. There several other street people huddled around a small fire burning in a barrel at the foot of a loading dock.

Silently, those around the fire shifted to make room for the two newcomers. As Sam joined the group he noticed the warm, yeasty smell of fresh baked bread.

It made his mouth water.

Just as Sam was about to ask where he was, a door to the building opened and a man rolled a cart out onto the dock. The cart was full of bread.

It was a bread factory, and all of the misshapen and irregular loaves were being set out for whoever wanted them.

The man closest to the cart picked up the first loaf, broke off a hunk, and passed it around the circle.

In silent communion with these vagabonds, Sam ate his fill.

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I’ve heard Christianity described like this: **“Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”** (attributed to D.T. Niles; Sri Lanken churchman)

I really like that description. It acknowledges that we are all on a search. That we are all hungry for something that will fill and satisfy our souls. We all long for something that will bring meaning and contentment to life.

I like it because it says we’re all on an even plane. We’re all beggars. The guy with the robes and the pulpit is no different than the gal in the bars. Nobody starts off better than anybody else.

And I like it because it uses the image of bread. That’s an image Jesus Himself uses to describe who He is. In our passage today—John 6—Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.”

And so, today, I feel like that shabby beggar, here to tell you where to find bread.

***Two Miracles, One Sermon***Let me remind you of the series we are in. In the weeks leading up to Easter, we are doing a series called *The Grave Robber.* It corresponds to a book written by Mark Batterson and a study that many of our small groups are working through right now.

And the study looks at the 7 miracles Jesus is described as doing in the gospel of John. It’s not that John is claiming that Jesus only did 7 miracles, he freely acknowledges that there were many more, but John has chosen to record only 7 of them. And John has a special word for these miracles: he calls them signs. Because for John Jesus wasn’t just a traveling preacher who could do astounding tricks and work wonders, but instead there was a deeper meaning to the miracles Jesus performed. They were signs of His glory. They were pointers to His identity and mission and message.

And so, we are looking at these 7 miraculous signs to see what we can learn about Jesus.

But, we’ve gotten a little off track. There are 7 signs, and there are 7 weeks in Lent. We were going to do one sign per week. But last week we interrupted our series so that the children could perform their wonderful musical for us. And that means, in order to get caught up, this week we need to look at two miracles.

But that’s o.k. Because, as we saw in the video, the next two signs come back to back in John 6. We’ve come to the miracles of Jesus feeding 5000 people and then walking on water. Today, then, you get two miracles in one sermon.

My emphasis, however, is going to be on the first miracle—the feeding of the five thousand. And the reason for that is: that’s where the gospel puts its emphasis. Most of John chapter 6, and it is a long chapter, is Jesus talking about bread. From verse 25 through verse 71, Jesus is giving what is known as the “Bread of Life” discourse. And He’s talking about bread because of the miracle. He multiplied the loaves and fish, and people don’t seem to understand the meaning. They think He’s going to be a king who can always keep their bellies full. Jesus has to explain.

We said that miracles are signs in the natural realm that point to significant things in the spiritual realm. And Jesus’ discourse appears to be the explanation of the fourth sign. So we need to spend our time looking at His explanation.

The interesting thing, however, is that the other sign occurs with almost no explanation and very little fanfare. When Jesus walks on water in John it is simply described, and then it is over. Nothing is made of it in the rest of the Gospel. I’ve got a theory about that, and I’ll come back to it towards the end.

***Be Careful How You Work***

But for now, I think we need to look at Jesus’ explanation of the fish and loaves miracle. We need to start at **John 6:25:**

**25**When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?”

**26**Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. **27**Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

This is the morning after the two miracles. Jesus has just taken 5 barley muffins and two sardines and turned them into a buffet for well over 5000 people. The people were so excited that they were prepared to make him king by force (v.15). So Jesus withdrew into the mountains while his disciples crossed the lake. Eventually, Jesus rendezvoused with them by walking on water. And now the whole crowd has come to the other shore and found Him again. And they are still ready to crown Him.

But Jesus puts them off. They’re missing the spiritual significance of what Jesus has done. They can’t get their minds off the earthly, the fleshly. With the miraculous fish and bread still digesting in their bellies, they aren’t seeing the spiritual nourishment which people need so badly and which Jesus came to give.

So Jesus says: “Do not work for food that spoils.” By food here He means not just literal bread, but also anything else that spoils or wears out. Anything else that has no value beyond the grave. He’s saying: “Do not work for food or for a bigger house or for clothes or cars or appliances or vacations or whatever.”

The meaning is probably similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 6:19, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.” Anything temporal that the heart can treasure, even immaterial things like prestige and power and status—all this is "food that spoils." It will be worthless at death and useless on the judgment day. So Jesus says, "Do not work for it."

Instead, Jesus says, we need to work for “food that endures to eternal life.” We need soul food. Food for our souls. Food that will bring us lasting nourishment. Food that will have eternal impact.

But the people Jesus is talking to—as is so often the case—have a hard time tracking with Him. They’re still thinking earthly. Still thinking about how to get ahead in this life. So they ask Him, in verse 28, “What kind of work must we do?”

And Jesus gives a surprising answer, **verse 29:**

**29**Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

The work God is looking for isn’t really work at all. God isn’t asking us to work our way into His good graces. In fact, trying to work our way to heaven won’t work at all. It’s a mountain too tall for us to climb. Remember, we’re all beggars.

And so, what we must do, Jesus says, is believe. We must believe in Jesus.

Now, this is an important verse, a key idea. We’re going to come back to this verse in a bit, because this is the application of this passage. This is how we’re being called to respond to this passage. By believing.

***Bread From Heaven***

But first, the crowd is still confused. They’re still stuck at the buffet line. Moses brought manna in the desert—not just once—but every day for nearly 40 years. Maybe Jesus can do His trick again. Maybe He can make a habit out of it. Is that the kind of bread Jesus is talking about?

So Jesus has to set them straight. **Verse 35:**

**35**Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Jesus is the bread of life. He is the food that endures, the food that brings eternal life.

In other words, Jesus is the satisfaction for the hunger of our souls. Jesus claims that He Himself fulfills our deepest longings and our most intimate yearnings. What temporary goods and goals promise but fail to deliver, Jesus has. He is the source of true joy in life. The way to really experience fulfillment and meaning.

This is the sign that the miracle of multiplication is pointing to. Jesus broke and distributed those loaves of bread to show us that He is the bread of life. He’s essential for soul survival. He’s what all of us beggars are searching for.

He says, "I Am." Those words, *ego eimi* in Greek, are the divine name for God in the Old Testament. When Moses is talking to the burning bush and asks who he should say had sent him, this is the name God chooses for Himself: *ego eimi*. I AM.

Seven times in the book of John, starting here, Jesus is going to use this phrase. He’s going to say: “I am the light of the world”; “I am the good shepherd”; “I am the resurrection and the life” and so on.

I AM. He is God. He is sent from Heaven. And He is food for the soul.

He says: “Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

He's not saying that we will no longer have internal yearnings.  He’s certainly not saying that our bellies will never rumble again. Or even that we will never feel dissatisfied with life.

But He is saying that we will never have those feelings that HE himself will not fill them.  We will have inside of us the source of all true satisfaction.  All true fulfillment.  Our souls will have a food dispenser built-in.

This is an appeal.  It's an invitation.

I’m one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread:

Come to Jesus and He will fulfill your heart’s hunger.  Turn from all in your life that you are counting on for satisfaction: your career, your family, your feasts, your sport, your entertainment, your drink, your fame, your physical life.  Those things WILL NOT satisfy.

Just as bread is necessary for physical life, JESUS is necessary for spiritual life. Jesus. No one--nothing, nothing else will satisfy.  Jesus alone will do.

***Broken Flesh, Spilled Blood***

Jesus has more to say in the next few verses about His Father’s will and the eternal security of all who believe in Him. But His audience is still struggling to keep up.

In verses 41 and 42 they start grumbling about Him. He’s Joseph’s son, He comes from Nazareth, how then can He say He has come down from heaven?

So like a patient kindergarten teacher, Jesus takes them through it all again. Verses 44-50 are essentially a repetition of everything He’s said before. But in **verse 51** He adds one crucial detail:

 **51**I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Whoa! Things just got a little weirder! Now Jesus isn’t just calling Himself the bread of life, He’s actually saying that this bread is His flesh, and we must eat that flesh to have eternal life.

And what Jesus is pointing to, of course, is His death. He’s letting us know that His dying is crucial to His being the bread of life.

Here’s a stark reality of life: for us to eat, something else has to die.

We’re used to thinking of food as something that comes in packages that we pull off the shelf at Fareway. But, except for the occasional mineral, everything we eat comes from dead things. Dead plants, dead animals. A cow eats dead grass to produce our milk.  A chicken dies for our McNuggets.  A pig dies for our BLT. The wheat plant must be destroyed before bread can be made.  Almost everything we eat, died.

And Jesus is claiming to be bread.  To be food for our souls. And the way that He accomplished this was to die for us.  To give the life He offers, He had to die. His flesh had to be given for the life of the world.

We do not simply come and trust a loving man. We pin all our hopes on the forgiveness that he purchased for us in laying down His life. He is not only the giver, but the gift, dead on our behalf, so that we might live.

***Fully Believing***

For the original audience, this was scandalous talk. Just as it is for us. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

But Jesus isn’t letting us off the hook. If anything, He puts it in even more stark terms. **Verses 53 and 54:**

**53**Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. **54**Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. **55**For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

It sounds like cannibalism; and in fact some early Christians were accused of being cannibals—because they used language like this. What does Jesus mean?

Well, I think we’re back to the application of this passage. The part where Jesus tells us to do work that isn’t really work. Remember verse 29, when Jesus tells us we must believe? I think what we have here is Jesus’ graphic metaphor of what that believing looks like.

Eating and drinking stand for fully believing.

We must take Christ into our inmost beings to have eternal life. For our hungry hearts to be satisfied, we must internalize Jesus.

You've heard the illustration “ask Jesus into your heart”?  This is "ask Jesus into your stomach." Fill yourself with Christ.  That's what it Biblically means to “believe” in Jesus.

It's not just a checklist of certain facts: I believe Jesus is the Son of God. I believe He died for the sins of humanity. I believe He rose from the dead. You must agree that those things are true.

But really believing in Him means filling yourself up with Him. It has to move the 18 inches from your head to your heart. We need to turn to Him for our soul’s nutrition. No longer working for food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life.

It’s this spiritual feeding on Christ that is symbolized by the Lord’s Supper. Jesus isn’t exactly talking about communion here. He’s not saying that you have to eat communion bread and drink out of those little plastic cups in order to have life. You can be a Christian and die and go to heaven without ever participating in a communion service.

But Jesus IS talking about what we believe the practice of communion represents: nourishing ourselves with Jesus. Filling ourselves up with Him as the only way to quench the hunger of our souls.

Manna, physical food for this physical life will give out.  It will eventually fail.

If you place your hope, your joy, your love, your satisfaction on anything in this world:
your career, your family, your food, your sports, your body, your entertainment, your alcohol, your fame, your physical life, your ministry--you will die.  Your soul will die. You are working for food that spoils. Like a beggar sifting through the garbage.

But not if you eat the real soul food.  Not if you come to believe in Jesus.  If you come to Him, you may pass through the portal of physical death, but you will not experience the death of your soul.  Your soul will be fed.

You will have what you need for survival.  And you will thrive.  You will eat that which is truly important in this life and the next.

So that’s the application for us today: believe in Jesus. Eat and drink Jesus. Fill yourself with Him. I’m one beggar telling other beggars where to find bread. Come to Jesus. Come and eat.

If you don't know Jesus in this way, you can start today.  Turn from all the other things you have been seeking to feed your soul with, and fill yourself with Jesus. Believe in Him.

And if you do know Jesus in this way, you might have drifted recently.  The world with all it offers for satisfaction and fulfillment might be tempting your heart.  This morning might find you struggling with something in this world that is claiming your allegiance, and it says, “Eat me for true life. Feed on me--worry or anxiety. Feed on me--pleasure or illicit sex.  Feed on me-- money or popularity.  I will satisfy your heart.”

Don't listen to those lies.  Feed on Jesus, the bread of life.  He died for you to give you life.  He is food for your soul if you believe in Him today.

***The Other Miracle***Now, what about that other miracle? How does the story of Jesus walking on water fit into this message that Jesus is food for your soul? Why does this long chapter of scripture—71 verses!—have this little anecdote about Jesus surfing without a surfboard?

Let’s look at how John tells the story, **John 6:16-22:**

**16**When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, **17**where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. **18**A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. **19**When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. **20**But he said to them, “It is I; don’t be afraid.”**21**Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

This miracle is also recorded in Matthew and Mark, but John shares the story with far less detail. The disciples are out on the lake, by themselves, a strong wind starts to blow, suddenly Jesus is there, they let Him into the boat, and immediately they reach their destination.

But John doesn’t say much more than that. He doesn’t even talk about Jesus calming the storm. That’s not the point. Instead, when these disciples are in the dark and their lives are imperiled, John places the emphasis on what **Jesus has to say to them**:

 It is I; don’t be afraid.

The point of the bread and fish miracle is that Jesus is enough. He is the bread from heaven, and if you feed on Him, you will live forever.

Now, the walking on water miracle seems to be making the same point. Jesus is enough. If He is present with you, you don’t need to be afraid.

Jesus is all you need.

He doesn’t just give you bread, He is the bread. He doesn’t just make the wind stop, He gets into the boat with you.

I’m one beggar telling a bunch of other beggars where to get bread. Won’t you come to Jesus and let your souls be satisfied?