

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING FOR?

by Ray C. Stedman

The sixth chapter of the Gospel of John is the setting for one of the great discourses of our Lord, his word on the "bread of life." Bread, of course, is the symbol for that which sustains and maintains life.

During the French Revolution, when the mobs of Paris were rioting and demonstrating outside the palace of Queen Marie Antionette, protesting the poverty in which they lived, the queen inquired of her courtiers what was the trouble. They said to her, "They have no bread." Marie Antionette is remembered for her hard-hearted and indifferent reply, "Then let them eat cake."

In this story in John's gospel a crowd of people are saying to Jesus, in effect, "We have no bread," but his reply is very different.

Jesus' discourse takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Some of you who have been in Israel have stood on the very site of this message of Jesus. A synagogue has been excavated there, and, though the present ruins probably date from a century later than this event in John's gospel, the site is exactly the place where Jesus stood when he gave this great message.

John gives the background of it, beginning in Verse 22:

On the next day the people who 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. However, boats from Tiberias came near the place where they ate the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the people saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boat 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?" {John 6:22-25 RSV}

Remember there were more than five thousand people on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee -- actually there were five thousand men alone -- who were fed bread and fish from a little lad's lunch, which Jesus multiplied to feed them all. A great many of that crowd remained on the eastern shore because they thought Jesus was still there. (Fortunately the Roman Gladiators and the Jewish Defense League were not playing football that day!) They noted that the disciples had left alone on the only available boat, but in the morning when they looked for Jesus they could not find him.

Judging that he had joined his disciples somewhere along the way, they entered the boats that had come into the harbor that night to flee the storm, went across to Capernaum, and there they found Jesus. Puzzled by how he got there, their question to him was naturally, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" It is clear that their question not only meant when, but how he got there.

In his reply, Jesus ignores both of these implications, but proceeds to tell them why they came to seek him.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you" [He introduces his answer by that formula which he uses to underscore the importance of what he is about to say], you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." {John 6:26 RSV}

Early in this gospel, John wrote that Jesus did not need anyone to tell him what was in man because he knew men. He could read the motives of these people's hearts, and he tells them plainly, "You did not come because you understood the signs that I performed, those signs predicted in the Old Testament to identify the Messiah."

On the other side of the sea they had tried to make him king, but Jesus says, "You did not want me for the right reason. You came, not because you understood that I was the Messiah, but because you wanted another free meal." But, as we saw earlier, he refused to be king on those terms. He did not come to be the Wholesale Food Distributor or the Chairman of the Lunch Committee. He came to give men something far more enduring and valuable than mere bread.

So he goes on to say,

"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." 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." {John 6:27-29 RSV}

It is very clear from that passage that these people greatly misunderstood who our Lord was, what he was doing, and what he said to them. In fact, no other passage of Scripture more clearly reveals the confusion in the average person's mind about Jesus.

I am reminded of the man who wore a button on his lapel inscribed, "BAIK." Asked what those letters stood for, he replied, "Boy, am I confused." When he was reminded that "confused" is spelled with a "c," not a "k," he said, "You don't know how confused I am!" This crowd is similarly confused.

Notice what Jesus must correct about their confusion:

First, he says to them, "Do not work for the food that perishes." He is not, of course, saying, "Do not work for a living." Many might take these words literally and go on welfare! But Jesus is not advocating that. What he means is, "Do not work merely to get food." Food is important. It is necessary for life, and you have to earn it. But do not let that be the sole reason for your working. Rather, "Work for the food which endures to eternal life."

These people, like many today, clearly felt that the most important thing in life is to keep alive, to be healthy, strong and economically sufficient. That was what life was all about, they thought. Clearly this is the majority view of people all over the world today: This is why people work. The Scriptures are always up to date. In this election year, candidates are being evaluated by the voters, not on their integrity, or their character, or what they propose to do about improving the moral conditions of this country, but on what will they do about the economy, how they will improve living conditions. The philosophy of many people today -- including many Christians, unfortunately -- could be described in these words,

Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born,
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.

Jesus asks the same question, "What are you working for?" to us this morning. Are you working merely to make a living, to have a nice home, to be comfortable and ready for the weekend? Are you one of those of whom it is said, "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is ready for the weekend"? If so, our Lord is saying that when you get all this you will find yourself wondering, as the popular song puts it, *Is This All There Is?* This morning we sang,

Our restless spirits yearn for thee,
Where e'er our changeful lot is cast.

That is true of all humanity. The thing that makes human beings different from the animals is that having a full belly and a comfortable place to rest does not satisfy us.

One of our pastors told me of a recent Barbara Walters' television program he watched in which she

interviewed three celebrities: Johnny Carson, Johnny Cash, and Walter Cronkite.

Johnny Carson, he told me, came across as the typical jaded playboy hedonist. Everything he said telegraphed the fact that he was living for pleasure, but, having tried everything and been everywhere he was fed up with the whole thing.

Walter Cronkite was the suave humanist, the worldly philosopher. Now retired and wealthy, he is enjoying life as best he can. He was looking at life rather philosophically, but all he really was saying was, "That's the way it is!"

Johnny Cash, on the other hand, admitted his background of alcoholism and dope addiction and the fact that he had virtually destroyed a marriage and wrecked his life. But he openly said he had found Jesus. There was peace in his eyes and contentment in his voice. He spoke of a hope for the future which neither of the others had.

Johnny Cash made very clear that he had found what Jesus is talking about right here -- the bread of life -- bread that lasts beyond the mere satisfaction of physical hunger.

Thus Jesus had to correct that view of life -- as he still corrects in our twentieth century day -- this majority, popular view that the only reason to work is to get enough money to make us comfortable. That must be corrected because it will not work. He directs the crowd to put their energy into learning about "the bread which endures to eternal life."

These people were mistaken about Jesus himself, too. They thought he was just another prophet. They were not ready to crown him King and Lord of their life. To them he was a new Moses, a godly man, a great teacher, yes, but nothing more than that. They thought he was a man whom God would use to deliver the nation from the Romans, a man who would feed their bellies and keep them satisfied and happy. But Jesus corrects that, saying, "Seek for the food which the Son of Man will give you for [don't miss this] on him has God the Father set his seal."

What does he mean by that? Whenever you read in the New Testament about being "sealed" of God, it always is a reference to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Believers today are said to be "sealed by the Spirit," {Eph 1:13, 4:30}. We have the Spirit, but in Jesus' case it was in full measure. There was never a moment in his life when he did not manifest the dynamic of the Spirit. That is why his words hit with such tremendous impact and power in people's lives, why his deeds were beyond the ordinary deeds of men -- because he was sealed of the Father. He was unique. There has never been anyone like him, before or since, in all of history. Jesus, the unique Son of God, possessed the Spirit in the fullness of measure.

Further, these people were mistaken about God's will for them, as are many today. When they realized that Jesus was talking about something other than physical bread, and he was talking about laboring for that, they said to him, "Then what work must we do to work the works of God?"

This question is frequently asked today, almost always by someone who has begun to realize that life has a spiritual dimension to it. It is a religious question, asking: "What can I do to make God happy? How can I please God by what I do?" Invariably it marks someone who has not yet learned to understand what God really wants. Usually they answer their own question in one of two ways, "Everything," or "Nothing." Those who say, "Everything" are saying that God is lucky to have them on his side. They have the resources, the money, the brains, the technological ability, the equipment, the know-how to make God's cause flourish, and they are ready to show the world what they can do for God.

I received a letter last week from a young Christian man who very earnestly wants to do something for God, but he has not learned at all what God wants. He proposes that we solve some of the problems in the church by calling together a special conference of the senior pastors of the largest churches in the country and let them share with each other the secrets of their success. By studying pollsters' findings on churches across the country and comparing notes on what does and does not work, he proposes, we could come up with a program that could then be peddled across the country to isolated churches, struggling churches, little churches

and big churches, and thereby get the church functioning the way God would like it to function. That is the "Let's do everything" approach. But he is totally unaware of the elitism inherent in that approach, or the reliance upon human wisdom and human power, the man-centeredness of it. He is ignorant of what Jesus warned about when he said, "that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God," {Luke 16:15 KJV}. He also said, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou has hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes," {Matt 11:25, Luke 10:21 KJV}. That is how God works. Most religious people, unfortunately, seem to be as unaware of that as non-religious people are. Thus they try to do everything for God.

Then there are those who say you can do nothing for God. A whole group of devoted, pious, well-intentioned people in the church say, "We have learned that God must do it all." They quote the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Without me you can do nothing," {John 15:5 KJV}. They say, "We don't have to do anything. Just wait and watch, sit quietly until the Spirit moves. Don't get involved. Don't initiate anything. Don't try to better your problem or condition. Don't do anything. Wait. It will all work out."

Our Lord indicates that both of these answers are wrong. They are extremes; they are both of the flesh. He says there is something we can do: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." "Believe in me," he is saying. That means, of course, to recognize first that he is present in your life. Believe that when he died and rose again and ascended into heaven and sent the Spirit again into this world it was in order to make himself available to us. That is the full gospel, the truly "good" news.

The gospel is more than merely a way to go to heaven when you die. That is an apocopted gospel (if I might use that term), a cut-off gospel, a half-gospel. The full gospel is that Jesus is alive now, and is available to us now where we are, where we work, whatever we are doing, in our struggles, in our strife.

Just yesterday I became involved with a big fight that was going on between two people in a nearby building where an office was being physically torn up over a struggle. I was drawn into the picture and had to count on the presence of the Lord to solve the problem. That is what he is here for. "Believe in him" begins with believing that he is available.

Second, "Believe in him" means to learn to look at your situation through his eyes, to see life as he sees it. That means you must listen to what he has to say; you must pay attention to his words and understand his point of view. Oftentimes that is totally different than the views of people who are always eager to give advice. Do not take your advice from others. Take it from Jesus. That is what it means. "Believe in me. Believe that I know what I am talking about. Believe that I can work." It means to learn the resources that he makes available to us, what the Bible calls "spiritual weapons," which the Apostle Paul says are "mighty," {2 Cor 10:4}. They can pull down strongholds; they change the course of history; they remove obstacles to the knowledge of God; they allow people to have light in their darkness and salt in their corruption. To learn this is the most exciting lifestyle you will ever know. That is what Jesus means when he says, "Believe in me." Learn to use those resources.

Thirdly, it means to count on Jesus to be at work in your ordinary responses to situations in which you find yourself. Expect him to be involved in them and to use those simple words or simple deeds in ways that "work the works of God." This is one of the most dramatic things our Lord ever said, this setting forth of the most exciting lifestyle you could ever imagine. In the ordinary circumstances of life you become the instrument of God at work. That is "doing the work of God."

Then, the fourth misunderstanding of this crowd is that they misinterpreted the signs that Jesus performed.

So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you?" [Imagine! After the miracle of feeding the five thousand!] 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.'" Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly [he underscores it], I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven [you are wrong about that]; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." {John 6:30-33 RSV}

They are not satisfied with the sign of the loaves and the fishes. They do not believe that is a sign that Jesus is the Messiah, so they are asking for another sign. Evidently they are thinking, "What you did yesterday was merely to give us bread and fish -- common, everyday food. There is nothing unusual about bread and fish, although multiplying it was a bit out of the ordinary. But Moses fed our fathers forty years on manna, food from heaven. Bread and fish come from the earth, but manna comes from heaven. What are you going to do to top that?" That is their attitude.

To that Jesus says, "You are wrong again. It wasn't Moses who gave you the manna. No, God did that." I have always been amazed at the Jews' interest in manna. According to the best descriptions given in the Bible encyclopedias I have looked at, manna tasted very much like corn flakes -- like ground coriander seed mixed with honey. Imagine eating corn flakes morning, noon and night for forty years, and thinking that was wonderful! The word "manna" itself means, "What is it?" Can you imagine eating "What is it" for forty years, every day, without fail, and then looking back on that as a great experience?

"No," Jesus said, "You are quite wrong. Moses did not give you that bread. Furthermore, what came in the wilderness was not the true bread from heaven -- it was only a symbol of it, a picture of it, a faint shadow of the real thing. The real bread from heaven is me! I came down from heaven, sent of the Father, to feed the restless hunger of the masses for meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction and excitement and glory in their lives. The true bread is he who came down from heaven who will give his life (not merely for Israel, as Moses did with the manna), but who will give his life for the whole world. Anybody of any race at anytime can find the true bread from heaven."

To this, the crowd responds with a request that leads us to declare plainly the truth he wants them to know:

They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me; and him who comes to me I will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day." {John 6:34-40 RSV}

We could spend a long time on those wonderful, gracious words. I do not want you to miss some important things there, so I will set them out quickly.

Jesus says three major things here.

First, he recognizes the universal hunger for bread beyond physical bread. "They said to him, 'Lord, give us this bread always.'" This was a mixed crowd of believers and unbelievers, but when they caught some sense that Jesus was talking about something other than physical bread they immediately wanted it.

I find this to be true all over the world. You cannot go anywhere on earth today without finding people hungry for something more than a full belly and a comfortable home. There is a restlessness about us that cries for more. Jesus recognized this. Everyone in this crowd wanted whatever it was he was offering. They did not understand what it was, but they wanted it. They sensed there was more to life than bread.

I spent time with a young pagan in London recently who told me he believed religion was nothing but eccentricity. He called himself a modern infidel, but when we parted after a full evening together I said to him, "You know, John, I believe that every man ought to have something bigger than himself to believe in." He looked me right in the eye and said, "My God, how right you are!" What is that but saying, "Give me this bread that is more than physical bread."

Then Jesus tells the crowd plainly (in Verse 35) how to eat and partake of the bread of life. He uses two

simple things everyone understands: hunger and thirst: "He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." What do you do when you are hungry? You eat, and if you keep on eating regularly you will never hunger. What do you do when you are thirsty? You drink, and if you keep on drinking you will never thirst. What Jesus is saying is that eating him is coming to him, or coming to him is to eat of him. "Coming" means to see him as present in your life and expecting him to do something -- to act, to comfort, to strengthen, whatever it is. "Eating" means a sense of expectancy that he is available and that he will act. "Drinking" is believing, listening to what he has to say and obeying it. If you keep on doing that you will never thirst. How simple, how beautiful this is! "Come and believe." Keep on coming. Keep on believing. This is the way to lay hold of the gift of bread from heaven, life that is real life indeed.

Jesus goes on in the next paragraph to speak of what can only be called the mystery of conversion. There are many things no one can explain about it, but Jesus says four wonderful things here:

First, not all who see will come: "But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe." They had understood a good deal about Jesus -- and it is possible to see that he is a significant figure, an important person, a living person -- and yet they did not come. He is not talking here about intellectual apprehension of who he is when he says, "Come." He is talking about trusting him, committing yourself to him.

Secondly, all who are chosen will come. I think he said this great word for his own benefit. How encouraging that must have been to him! "All that the Father gives me will come to me." I have had to say this to encourage myself when I have been preaching: "If God has been at work, people will respond." The Spirit leads them, the Father draws them, and all who are chosen will come. So, to really and truly come is to reveal that you have been chosen. You do not have to struggle with it and ask yourself, "Am I chosen?" Just come. If you can come to Jesus you have been chosen.

Thirdly, all who come are welcomed: "Him who comes to me I will never cast out." No matter what your record, no matter what you have done, where you have been, or how proud, arrogant and self-sufficient you have been, when you come you will be welcomed. You will not be cast out. There is no sin Jesus cannot forgive, so come.

Fourthly, all who come are forever safe. You will never be lost; you will never lose what Jesus gives. He underscores that with four wonderful reasons:

- First, because of his own work: "I have come down from heaven to do this very thing."
- Secondly, because it fulfills the Father's will: "This is the will of my Father that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me." He will never, ever lose anything of what he has been given.
- Thirdly, because it involves even the resurrection of the body. Twice he says, "I will raise him up at the last day." Even death with its decay and its corruption is not going to defeat his purposes. What a hope this gives us in the hour of our passing! He will "raise us up at the last day."
- And, finally, because it involves the gift of eternal life right now: "Everyone who sees the Son and believes on him has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

How reassuring are those wonderful words!

Let me leave you with the Lord's question, "What are you working for?" Why are you going back to work tomorrow? Is it merely to earn a living, to put some food on the table, to pay your rent, or buy a TV? Is that it?

If you live like that you are missing out on all God intends for you. Go to work, but go with the expectation that in the people you meet, the situations you face and the difficult decisions you have to make, Jesus is present with you. As you learn how to act according to what he sees the situation to be, how to make moral judgments of right and wrong according to what he says, and obey him, you will discover that your heart is filled with joy and satisfaction, that you are the instrument of God at work.

There is no more exciting lifestyle than that. It may be dangerous, but it will never be boring!

Prayer:

Thank you, Our Father, for the bread that came down from heaven, that bread of life which is available to us, Lord, which you have offered to give us and do give us as we believe in you. Teach us what these words mean. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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