

June 19, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Barley Biscuits and Sardines

John 6:1 – 15

The gospel is the power of God through Christ connecting with us in such a way that we not only become the objects of His grace but the means of His grace to others. That is the message of this passage. And strikingly, the power of God is demonstrated through the means of an insignificant, little boy who happened to bring his snack to this event. He may not have been the only one who had something to snack on, but the fact is, he was the only one who offered to share. He is poor, we know that because he had barley loaves to eat. We wouldn't know this today, but in that day, in fact up until fairly recent history, only the poorest sort of bread was made from barley. Samuel Johnson, arguably the most distinguished man of letters in English history, once wrote: '**Barley is grain which, in England, is fed to horses, and in Scotland is fed to people.**' Barley was the bread of the poor, and this was a poor boy. He had five little barley biscuits; and he also had two fish, small ones – and the emphasis is on small here. That's why I call this a story about barley biscuits and sardines. In actual fact, the fish were probably from Galilee and as such were probably one of the local variety, but relative to the need, they looked like sardines.

And if you think on it, here is this one little boy, singled out of this crowd of thousands, and other than the fact that now he is rather famous, since for 2,000 years his story has been told, was a fairly insignificant player on the stage. Who was he? We don't know – we are not even told his name. But the very fact that he is a poor, insignificant nobody, has a lot to do with this story. One of the things we see is that though this boy is, on his own, insignificant and unremarkable, **in the hands of Jesus He becomes significant.** And though the offering he gave was on the face of it, insufficient for the moment, **in the hands of Jesus, it becomes more than sufficient.** That's the message. That's it. I suppose we could all go home now. But I should take some time to elaborate a little on this. First of all we should note that this is only one of three events that all the gospel writers include. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all record Jesus' death, and His resurrection, and this story of the barley biscuits and sardines. What that should tell us right up front is that this is probably significant. We should pay attention here.

One of the reasons I believe that we find this story in all four gospels is simply **to bear witness to the veracity of this miracle.** All the writers tell us that there were at least five thousand men there. And they don't tell us anything about the women and children present. But we know that the crowds that followed Jesus had to have been made up of men, women and children. And this wasn't a Promise Keepers event – so there were women and children along with the men – at least fifteen thousand. Think of it. When Paul tells us that there were 500 people in addition to the disciples to whom Jesus appeared after His death and resurrection – we have to say, 'That's a significant number of people'. And the fact that Paul's letters were written within twenty to thirty years of Jesus' resurrection means that many of those people would still have been around. And if His resurrection was simply a fabrication by His followers – this movement would have been dead before it began. Nobody would have believed it.

But here we don't have five hundred, we have maybe fifteen thousand people who witnessed this supernatural event. Years later you would have had these people telling others, 'I was there when Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fishes – I saw it.' So one of the reasons was to bear witness to the truth of this miracle. But the other, more important reason is that **this was one of the ways in which Jesus announced to the world who He was.** In the Old Testament, God fed His people with bread in the wilderness. The witness of the power of God was that He can sustain life in a dead place. And because of this sign of power, the prophets continually said that the Prophet, when He comes will feed His people with bread. So here is Jesus, taking the crowd into a wilderness area and feeding them with bread. He is serving notice that He is the Prophet of whom Moses wrote – and in fact that is the message that these people got: *Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.* John 6:14 The power of God in the Bible is always distinguished by the fact that it is life-giving power. He is the Creator God – bringing life into being from nothing – the God of resurrection life – making dead men to live. Death is the ultimate enemy and when Jesus came He put death to death. So the power of Jesus is the power of God to give life, it is the sign from above, the sign of the Messiah, life-giving power, death-defeating power, He brings life out of nothing, He feeds them in the desert – **and He serves notice that He is the Christ.**

Verse one tells us this: *After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias).* John 6:1 After the encounter with the lame man at the pool and the testimony of Jesus, where Jesus discloses the great truths of who He is: namely that He is God with all authority over life, judgment and resurrection, and put His seal to that by healing the lame man, He takes His disciples and heads to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And John says that they weren't alone: *A large crowd followed Him, because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.* John 6:2 John leaves out a lot of detail here because we go from Jesus' healing of the lame man in Jerusalem, to His testimony in chapter five – straight here to Galilee. But if you read the other gospels, you see that there were things that happened along the way from Jerusalem to Galilee – namely, He was healing sick people along the way. But there was another reason the crowds were around.

John records: *Then Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat down with His disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near.* John 6:3-4 If we go to the other gospels, like Matthew, we get a better handle on the details. Matthew, Mark and Luke all say that Jesus' going up on the mountain had to do with events concerning John the Baptist. John had been in prison for some time now, and in Matthew 14 we read about his execution by Herod, and his burial by John's disciples. Then Matthew tells us: *Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities. When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick.* Matthew 14:13-14 And John adds the fact that the Passover was near, which implied that these crowds were probably making their way to Jerusalem for that big event when someone noticed that Jesus was in the area.

Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. John 6:5-6 From the other gospels we understand that this was really a full day's event, because the real test didn't come until it became obvious that something needed to be done, and when evening came, the crowds didn't leave and here they are, miles from nowhere – not a Burger King in sight. And Jesus initiates the test. **Jesus will always test us.** And the test is always designed to see in whom or in what we are putting our trust. Why did Jesus ask Philip this question? Wasn't that kind of sneaky? He already knew what He was going to do – why put poor Philip on the spot?

What this shows I believe, is that we continually need to be reminded that all that we can do is always insufficient for the moment – whatever moment that is. That is, **we cannot know the power of God until we realize our own powerlessness.** Philip looked at the crowd, and he probably wanted to say something like 'Why is this my problem – let them eat cake'. He's looking at a small city's worth of people milling about and suddenly he's responsible. 'Philip, what are we going to do?' And essentially Philip says, 'I have no idea'. *Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little."* John 6:7 The whole idea of getting Philip to say, 'I don't know what to do – we don't have that kind of money – besides you know Judas is pilfering the funds anyway' – **the whole goal of that, was to get him to admit he was powerless.**

Until we can come to terms with our own powerlessness to do anything, we cannot know the power of God. Jesus was leading them into an understanding of their inability to do anything about the problem. He will always do that – He will always take us to the place where we recognize that our resources will never meet the need of the moment – we need something more – we need the power of God. If you think that you can run your own life – I just want to ask you – how's that working for you? Paul, the apostle, had an insurmountable problem in his life that he begged God again and again to handle. And the Lord's reply was *"My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:9 In other words, Jesus is saying, 'The only way you can experience My grace, the only way you can know My power, is when you are at your most vulnerable – when you are weak.'

Listen, the only way we will experience the power of God in our lives is first that we realize we are powerless. When you came to Christ, did you come on the basis of your inherent ability to handle life? Did you say, 'I'm doing pretty well and I really don't need much help, but I'd kinda like to add Jesus to the mix?' No one who truly surrenders his or her life to the Lordship of Christ says that. If you do, then you have not come to Christ. You've come to some figment of your imagination. But when you say, 'I'm weak, I've not been very successful in doing this on my own, I need help' – then the power of God is unleashed to do in and through you what you could never do yourself.

And then Andrew points out that the only thing that even comes close to being a solution to the problem is vastly insufficient for the moment: *One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?"* John 6:8-9 If you think about it, this is really the moment of comic relief. Fifteen thousand people – five barley biscuits and a couple of sardines. That's it. You've got one small, poor lad who remembered to bring a snack – and then Jesus does something remarkable – He takes his snack. Here's this boy out there in the middle of fifteen thousand famished people and Jesus takes his food – and then He uses it to feed everybody. There's a couple more things to note here.

First of all we will never know the power of God as a reality in our lives until we admit that we are powerless. And secondly, **we will never know the power of God until we put everything in His hands.** And when we do, not only are we satisfied, everybody around us will be blessed. We will never know the power of God in our lives until we put everything in His hands. Look at this little boy – He lost his lunch – Jesus took it – and as a result, he enjoyed far more than he ever could have if he had gone off by himself to eat it. In giving up his lunch, he lost control of it. Some of us are afraid of losing control – what's going to happen if I give it all over to Jesus? How can I be sure that I won't regret it? How do I know that He'll take care of me? What if His plans are to give my whole lunch to everybody else and I go hungry? Because he gave up control of his stuff – not only did he have way more than he could have imagined in the first place – but everybody around him was filled to capacity and then some. **It is only when we entrust everything to Him that we can be a means of blessing to others.**

Look at what it says: *Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.* John 6:10-11 Everybody ate – everyone of those fifteen thousand people not only had lunch – they had as much as they wanted. When we give everything over to Jesus – when we give up control of our lives and plans and ambitions and most of all our stuff – **the power of God is unleashed in our lives and the lives of those around us.** In the hands of Jesus, what is insufficient to the moment becomes gloriously abundant and overflowing. Remember the words of the Lord on giving in Luke 6: *"Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure -pressed down, shaken together, and running over.* Luke 6:38 Our five barley biscuits and two sardines become a feast in the hands of the Master of the feast.

And not only that – there is stuff left over. **When we put it all into the hands of Jesus, our insufficiency becomes an abundance:** *When they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost." So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten.* John 6:12-13 What we see here is **the all-sufficient power of Christ to not only feed us what we need, but to supply our needs superabundantly.** Jesus is always bursting the boundaries of our expectations. In the Old Testament, the people only gathered enough manna to feed themselves for one day – in fact if you took too much, the extra stuff spoiled and went bad. You never had leftovers then. But here Jesus goes out of His way to tell us that His provision is always more than enough. Everybody stuffs themselves and yet there are twelve baskets of food leftover. Jesus is telling us that He is Lord of the feast. His first miracle was to make the best wine anyone had ever tasted and here He is saying, 'I am going to feed you and there's going to be more than enough. I am Lord of the feast'.

But to put ourselves in His hands and experience the all-sufficient power of Christ in our lives means at least two things. **It means first of all that we obey what He has said.** We obey knowing that His power is always sufficient to meet and exceed the need. We obey like Abraham obeyed. When God told Abraham to sacrifice the son of promise, Abraham's response was to meditate on the power of God. The writer of Hebrews tells us: *'He considered [He thought about and pondered and meditated on the fact] that God is able to raise people even from the dead...'* Hebrews 11:19 When faced with the impossibility of this command, Abraham's first response was to count up all the reasons for trusting God and to remind himself of God's limitless power. He thought about the fact that this was God who was able to call something into being that had no being – the God that said you will have a son and your descendents will be innumerable, like the sands of the sea and he had a son. He filled his heart and mind with the knowledge of who God was and what kind of power He had.

The first step is always obedience – and it is obedience that has God's ability, not ours, in view.

It is treating Him as a God of power. There is no internal evidence for it, but I think this little boy somehow knew that his meager offering could be transformed into something great by the power of this man. He had been watching Jesus do some miraculous things, and may have thought – 'If anybody can feed this crowd with five barley biscuits and two sardines, He can'.

So many people will say that they just want God's will for their lives and if He would show them what that is they would do it. But what about His will that you already know? What about the stuff that is plainly stated in the word? Are we obeying that? Many times we see what God's will is in the word but we waver – 'That's too hard – or, if I do that, who knows what will happen – or we explain it away and say, He couldn't have meant that.' Are you doing the part of His will that you already know? Are you praying without ceasing and ceasing to worry? Are you loving your neighbor as yourself? Are you giving to God and to others cheerfully – full of joy at the prospect of giving it away? You know the Bible makes it clear that God expects you to give Him the firstfruits of your labor. And yet we find ourselves giving Him the leftovers, if even that, because there is just too much month left at the end of the money.

But what you are doing is refusing to treating Him as a God of power. When you say 'If I give it to you first – I won't have enough left to pay the bills' you are not only refusing to obey, you are refusing to treat Him as a God of power. We are comfortable with the theoretical – it is when it gets personal that we object. 'Lord I know that you own the cattle on a thousand hills – but I'm kinda doubtful that You'll sell a few to cover my needs'. And unless you are obeying what you already know, you are not putting yourself into His hands – you are simply hedging your bets. You cannot know the limitless power of God until you put yourself unreservedly into His hands, and you cannot put yourself in His hands unless you obey what you already know.

Finally, to put ourselves in His hands means that **we realize God's power is for us and not against us.** The Psalmist sings of this: *Oh let those who fear the LORD say, "His lovingkindness is everlasting." From my distress I called upon the LORD; The LORD answered me and set me in a large place. The LORD is for me; I will not fear; What can man do to me?* Psalm 118:4-6 And Paul echoes this in Romans 8: *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?* Romans 8:31-32 Over and over the Bible makes the point that our God is for us – He is not against us. He is not sitting in heaven, watching us with eagle eyes, ready to pounce on us when we do the wrong thing. He is not the killjoy of the cosmos, waiting to reduce us to tears if He sees us having too much fun. He is **for** us. All of His energy is bent toward bringing many sons to glory. His joy is that our joy would be made full – and overflowing. He is for us.

We hesitate to put ourselves completely in His hands because we have this lingering doubt that He is really for us. After all, doesn't He order and allow circumstances into our lives that are unpleasant – even painful? Yes He does. We must acknowledge that our God who is sovereign has handcrafted everything in our lives to resound to His glory – and our good. But even when He cuts us like a careful, loving surgeon, every move of the scalpel has a purpose in mind. He's a good surgeon, and like every good surgeon, He doesn't just cut us to make us bleed. Everything He does has our redemption in view. The prophet Amos, speaking of the Lord's disciplinary dealings with His people says this: *Come, let us return to the LORD. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. "He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may live before Him.* Amos 6:1-2 This is a God who is for us, not against us.

Finally, if you are here this morning and you've never trusted in Christ, you've never given Him your barley biscuits and sardines and entrusted your life to Him – don't be like the crowd. Look at their response to Jesus' stunning generosity: *Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.* John 6:14-15 They saw the sign – they even made the connection – He's the Prophet, but they only saw Him as a life-enhancer. In their minds they would never go hungry again because this guy made bread and fish. They wanted to make Him king for what He could do for them. They had no intention of putting everything in His hands. And Jesus knew it – and He left. Don't be like the crowd this morning – you may experience something of the overflow of Christ's power like they did through the channel of that little boy – but when that is over, Jesus is gone and you've missed Him. Come to Christ this morning, acknowledge your powerlessness and put your barley biscuits and sardines in His hands and experience the power of God through the gospel in your life and flowing out of your life into those around you.

Our gracious and good heavenly Father,

You have promised that in Christ the enslaved find redemption, the guilty pardon, the unholy unimaginable glory. In Him is everlasting strength for the weak, unsearchable riches for the needy, treasures of wisdom for the ignorant and fullness for the empty. And if we entrust our meager offering of barley biscuits and sardines to You, they become a feast for us and a means of fullness and grace for others. Grant us to know our powerlessness and Your all-sufficient supply. May we treat You as a God of power, giving everything into Your hands, obeying with joy all that You have said. Assure our souls once again that You are forever for us and not against us and let us be those who delight ourselves in You through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray, in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.