

June 26, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

This is the Work of God

John 6:16 – 29

One of the characteristics of Jesus' teaching is that He takes normal everyday stuff and uses it to point to Himself. He used wine in chapter two to point to Himself as the One who gives genuine, lasting joy, not the temporary pleasure of man-made manufactured joy. He uses water in chapter four to point to Himself as the eternal thirst-quencher of every thirsty soul. And here in chapter six He uses bread to point to Himself as the Bread of Life that comes down from heaven. And as we progress through this chapter we see Him using increasingly provocative and even offensive language to explain that this miracle with the bread is all about Him.

And when you look at the images He uses, you need to understand that God created bread, and our need for it, in the first place so that when Jesus comes on the scene He would be able to use the enjoyment and satisfaction and nourishment of bread as an illustration of what it means to believe on Him and be satisfied with Him. Bread exists to help us know what it means to be filled with the Bread of Heaven. Water exists to help us know what it is to thirst no more when we drink of the Water of Life. Light was created so that we can understand the Light of Life. Nothing exists haphazardly or randomly. **Every legitimate pleasure and satisfaction that exists, exists to give us a taste of heaven and make us hunger for God.** Every partial satisfaction in this life points to the perfect satisfaction in Christ who made the world.

But a corresponding characteristic of the effect of Jesus teaching was that people generally didn't get it. Jesus talks about things in the material realm to point to things in the spiritual realm and they consistently misinterpret what He says. He tells the leaders of Israel, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up' and their response was strictly tied to this material world, 'It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?'. He tells Nicodemus, 'You must be born again' and all he can think about is how does a man return to his mothers' womb? He tells the Samaritan woman that He would give her living water, and she says, 'But you don't have a bucket'. And in the first part of this chapter, Jesus feeds this huge crowd with five barley biscuits and two fish, and all they can think about is making Him king so they won't go hungry. This happens time and time again in the gospels – people see the signs and miss the message.

I pray that would not be our case this morning. I am praying, and I have prayed for you, that we would not be counted with those who saw the signs and missed the message. Look at the language in chapter 6: *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 We've heard this language before and it is not encouraging. In chapter two, after the temple cleansing, John records: *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men.* John 2:23-24

They saw the signs – the word sign means that what He was doing pointed to something and it says they saw the sign. In chapter six they saw that what He did with the bread pointed to the fact that He was the prophet who was to come, predicted by Moses. **They saw the sign and yet they missed the message.** They believed that Jesus was a genuine miracle worker – they were excited by the signs – but something was wrong with their hearts. The signs pointed to Christ – but they misread them and got excited about a Jesus who didn't exist. They assumed that these signs meant that He was going to make life better for them – they assumed He was here to kick out the hated Romans and restore the glory of Israel in the world and feed them with miracle bread, and they wanted to make Him king. But here was a King who would not be king on any terms but His own. The enthusiasm and excitement they had was not for who He really was. And John says that Jesus left and went to the mountain. If your enthusiasm for Jesus is built on your terms, He will leave you and withdraw to the mountain. Jesus never commits Himself to those who look for Him on their terms – He shuns the thrill-seekers and those who want to use Him. And this passage points out the difference between those who see the signs and miss the message, and those who see the signs and embrace the message. In fact, this entire chapter highlights **the difference between genuine disciples – and wannabe's**, and we will see that by the end of chapter six most of those who followed Christ had left Him.

After He fed the multitudes and their response was to try and make Him king, John says that Jesus went to the mountain and the disciples went to the sea: *Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.* John 6:16-17 If you read this same account in Matthew and Mark, you understand that Jesus actually sent the crowd away, and told the disciples to head to the other side of the lake, and He went to pray. Jesus will often do this kind of thing with us. He will send us off, knowing that there is a storm coming, but He'll be up on the mountain praying. The disciples may have thought this was a little odd – like, 'Jesus, how are you going to get to the other side?' Nevertheless they obeyed.

This passage points out some of the distinguishing marks of genuine disciples and wannabes. Genuine disciples here are distinguished by **obedience, devotion and worship**. And those who are merely wannabes are marked by **disobedience, idolatry, and works**. Notice the **obedience** of real disciples. Instead of getting into the boat with them, Jesus sends them on without Him to the other side, and they did it. They probably had questions as to the practicality of this – like how was Jesus going to get there – but they went ahead and got in the boat and started rowing. **Obedience to Christ means acting on the word He gives, whether or not it makes sense to us.**

I think of men like John Paton who heard God call him to preach the gospel to the cannibals in the New Hebrides Islands. But he was young and inexperienced and when he shared this vision with his church elders, they pointed these things out. One of them, a Mr. Dickson implored him not to go, "**The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!**" The memory of John Williams and James Harris on the island of Erromanga was only 19 years old. But to this Paton responded: *'Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.'* John Paton went to Erromanga and spent thirty-five years preaching the gospel, and at the end of it he said, *'I do not know of one single native that has not made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ.'* **Obedience to Christ means acting on the word He gives, whether or not it makes sense to us.**

There is a second characteristic of a genuine disciple and that is **devotion**. True disciples are radically devoted to Christ. That is, they want His presence more than they want anything – even His power. They do not want Him for what He can do for them, they want Him for Himself. John tells us they obeyed Jesus and took off in the dark for the other side, and then he describes the trip: *The sea began to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing.* John 6:18 John says it was a strong wind – that is probably an understatement. Matthew tells us that the wind and the waves were battering the ship, and Mark tells us that they were straining at the oars, trying to row against the wind and not really making any headway – that's a pretty strong storm. And at this point, they were probably wondering where Jesus was because all it took was a word from Him last time and the storm was over.

However, He was closer than they thought: *Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened.* John 6:19 It is interesting that none of the gospel writers say that the disciples were frightened by the storm – but they were when they saw Jesus walking on the water. Matthew tells us that they thought He was a ghost. Their experience with Jesus thus far had prepared them for a lot of things, but apparently not for men walking on water. And Mark adds an interesting note here: *'...at about the fourth watch of the night He came to them, walking on the sea; and He intended to pass by them.'* Mark 6:48 And Mark says at that point they cried out and Jesus spoke: *But He said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid."* John 6:20

When you are being battered by the storms of life – when things are confusing and you think you're seeing ghosts – when your obedience to Christ lands you in unfamiliar territory – there is only one thing you want as a genuine disciple – His presence. You need to hear Him say, **'It is I; don't be afraid!'** What is also interesting is that the storm is still raging and the disciples are not asking Him to miraculously make the storm disappear. They are not interested in signs and wonders here but in the nearness and presence of Jesus. If **He** feels fine walking on stormy seas, then **they** know He has things in hand. Robert Louis Stevenson tells the story about an old ship that got caught in a fierce storm just off a rocky coast. The wind and waves threatened to drive the boat onto the rocky reef. In the midst of the terror, one daring passenger, contrary to orders, made his way across the ship and found the pilot house. There he saw an intriguing sight; the ship's captain was lashed to his post. Secure against the raging elements, he held the wheel, turning the ship, inch by inch, once more out to sea. The captain saw the watcher and smiled. This guy made his way back down below deck where the other passengers huddled, and he told them **"I have seen the face of the captain, and he was smiling. All is well."**

Genuine disciples are more concerned with His presence than His power. Peter was so concerned that Matthew tells us that he said: *"Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."* And He said, *"Come !"* And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus. Matthew 14:28-29 In spite of the storm that still raged, Peter felt perfectly fine getting out of the boat because Jesus was there. Now I know most of the time we focus on the fact that Peter eventually started looking around and started to sink. But the fact remains that he did something no one other than Jesus has done – He walked on the water. But on the strength of **'It is I; don't be afraid!'** Peter got out of the boat to get to Jesus. Peter knew that wherever Jesus was that was the place to be. For him, the presence of Jesus was enough. Apparently the fact that the storm was still going on didn't register, because Matthew tells us that it was only when he got out and took his eyes off Jesus that he noticed he was outside his comfort zone.

But Jesus had said, 'It is I', or literally He said **'Ego eimi' – I AM**. And this was a direct reference to the very name of God in the Old Testament. When Moses asked God what His name was so he could tell Pharaoh – God said: **'I AM is My name.'** This is the divine revelation of who Jesus is – **He is the I Am**. He is the self-existent, eternal God. He is not only the Lord of the Feast – making bread and fish from nothing – He is the Lord of the storm, Master of wind and wave – and that is all the encouragement Peter needed to step out of the boat. Because in His presence, in every storm we face in life we can step out of the boat if He is on the waves.

Which is why John goes on to say: *So they were willing to receive Him into the boat, and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going.* John 6:21 And here we have the final mark of the genuine disciple – **worship**. John doesn't tell us this but Matthew makes it clear: *When they got into the boat, the wind stopped. And those who were in the boat worshiped Him, saying, "You are certainly God's Son !"* Matthew 14:32-33 First comes obedience, next is devotion, and that always leads to worship. That is where every true disciple of Christ spends a large amount of time – worshipping at the feet of Jesus. Not saying 'Do this or do that for me – but simply worshipping Him for who He is. That is what marked Mary, the sister of Martha, who chose the better part at Jesus' feet. Jesus did not chide Martha for her service – but rather for her worry and anxiety, and essentially said that **worship overcomes worry**. And as the disciples worshipped Him, the storm stopped, and apparently without any further effort on their part, they arrived at the shore.

Those are the characteristics of genuine disciples. Now lets finish with the contrast – the characteristics of the wannabes. And they are exactly the opposite of the genuine disciples. Instead of obedience you get disobedience; **instead of devotion you get idolatry; instead of worship you get work**. Lets pick it up here in verse 22: *The next day the crowd that stood on the other side of the sea saw that there was no other small boat there, except one, and that Jesus had not entered with His disciples into the boat, but that His disciples had gone away alone.* John 6:22 **Disobedience** is the first characteristic. Matthew and Mark both clearly say that before He left for the mountain, Jesus told them all to go home. But here they are, standing on the shore, looking for Jesus. The clear fact is that they had not obeyed Jesus' instruction to leave. And we might think, 'O that's a great thing – these people are looking for Jesus.' But John makes it clear that they were looking for Him for all the wrong reasons. They looked for Him because they wanted to use Him for what He could do for them. They didn't want to obey Him – they wanted Him to obey them. **Wannabes don't want to obey Him – they want Him to obey them.**

It is possible to seek Christ for all the wrong reasons. We get a picture of that in Matthew 7: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles ?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'* Matthew 7:21-23 To practice lawlessness is simply to disobey. Disobedience is lawlessness, and that is the dividing line between those who say they are Christians and those who actually are. Obedience. But eventually they find a way to get to Jesus: *There came other small boats from Tiberias near to the place where they ate 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 small boats, and came to Capernaum seeking Jesus.* John 6:23-24

However their reception by the Lord must have surprised them: *When they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here ?" Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled.* John 6:25-26 And here we see the second characteristic of the disciple wannabe: **idolatry. Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that ought to be worshiped.**

They weren't looking for Jesus because they saw and interpreted the sign of the miracle of the bread correctly – that this was the Messiah who would save them from their sins. They wanted bread. They ate a miraculous dinner the evening before – now they were looking for breakfast. There are so many people who want a Jesus who will work for them. They want a genie in a bottle – rub the bottle when you are in need and out pops Jesus who does a miracle and then He goes back in the bottle, to be put aside until the next emergency. They weren't interested in His person, they were all consumed with how this will help me. Jesus came into the world to rescue us from sin and death and absorb the wrath of God on our behalf. If we only see Him as a miracle worker, we will end up idolizing the things that ought to be used and using the One who is to be worshipped.

Finally we see the third characteristic of the wannabe disciple: instead of worship – **work**. What do I need to do to make this happen? Listen to what Jesus says and their response: *"Do not work 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 the Father, God, has set His seal."* Therefore they said to Him, *"What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?"* John 6:27-28 Again, Jesus is using natural language to disclose spiritual realities and they don't get it. Jesus says that they are working for something – and what they are working for is the wrong thing. He is talking about work and food, but He's not talking about **work** and **food**. But their hearts are so wrapped up in themselves what they hear is Jesus telling them they have to work for something. And their response is 'Tell us what to do and we'll do it' – whatever we have to do to keep the miracles coming, we're there'.

But Jesus says, 'Once again you missed it – the work I am talking about is to believe in Me'. *Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent."* John 6:29 'That miracle you saw yesterday? All the healings before that? Those are about Me, not you. Those testify to who I am – and I am the One whom the Father has sent into the world to rescue you from the wrath to come.' Every man's default position is what do I have to do to get to heaven. Martin Luther once said that the most damnable and pernicious heresy that has ever plagued the mind of man was the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God. You see, doing something makes us feel strong, in charge, competent, able. But believing is means that we are not in charge – we're not competent – we're not able. **Believing in Jesus takes us out of the realm of what we can do into the realm of what HE can do.**

Genuine disciples are those who know what it means to obey Christ – they are those who value His presence over His power – and those who worship Him for who He is. Are you a genuine follower of Jesus or merely a wannabe? Are you obeying the word you've heard, or does it go in one ear and out the other? Are you earnestly seeking His presence or simply looking to Him as a miracle worker? Are you sitting at His feet in worship and adoration, or are you still working to make yourself good enough? Oh may Christ grant us to be genuine through and through.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

Grant us to see beyond the natural into the heavenly this morning. Let the light of Your glory and grace penetrate sin-hardened hearts and pierce the fog of dullness and lead us into truth. May obedience, devotion and worship mark our lives. Let us be lost in wonder, love and praise of the One to whom we owe all our obedience, devotion and worship. Forbid it Lord that we would hear Your word and go away unchanged, still lost in our willful disobedience and idolatry, using what we ought to worship and worshipping what we ought to use. Turn us from our headlong pursuit of our own ends, working to make ourselves acceptable to You. Grant us hearts of genuine lovers of Jesus, fully devoted followers who live to delight ourselves in God 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.