

THE WORK OF GOD

John 6:25-40

Key Verse 6:29

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

We’ve already read the key verse for today’s passage, but let’s read it one more time: **“Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’”** When Pastor Ron asked me to share a message focusing on the campus mission work here in Chicago, this verse immediately came to mind. It is a verse that is amazing in its simplicity and directness. Yet, at the same time, it is a verse that speaks to the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. What is more, it speaks to the very heart of what it means to do Christian mission. We have all heard many, many ideas about what is God’s work, and what isn’t. Am I doing God’s work? Are you? Who can say? Still, I can’t help but think that all the explanations and all the opinions have somehow overlooked this verse. I am sure there are any number of reasons why we don’t necessarily take this verse quite seriously. Now, we have to be mindful of the whole Bible and view each individual verse in relation to what the rest of the Bible says. So, even though this verse is as plain as can be, and though Jesus explains quite thoroughly what he means, and though his message here is confirmed through his death and resurrection, and though it resonates throughout Paul’s teaching on salvation by faith and James’ teaching on how faith and works go hand in hand, we are not altogether sure that is ok for us to simply accept this verse at face value and trust that the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. And if we were to take this verse seriously, we are not quite sure what then we should do.

In my message to you today, I am going to take this verse very seriously. I will urge you to take this verse seriously and as fundamental to our faith and mission, as well. I pray that as a result, your call to discipleship and to raising disciples will become clearer, and most importantly, more fruitful, indeed bearing fruit that will last. I have no more authority than any of you, and perhaps in many people’s eyes far less! If I speak with any authority and conviction, may it be with the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and with the authority of Christ Jesus, God’s Living Word.

THE WORK OF GOD

The sixth chapter of John begins with the story of the miracle of the five loaves and two fish, in which Jesus fed a crowd of 5,000 men, plus women and children, with just the five loaves and two fish that Jesus' disciple Andrew brought to him. What is more, the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of pieces left over after everyone had their fill. History attests to the impact of this miraculous feeding of the crowd by the simple fact that it is the only miracle, other than Jesus' death and resurrection, that is recorded in all four gospels. It was such a shocking event that it took the disciples and the crowd a fair amount of time to realize what had happened. When it dawned on the crowd what Jesus had done, they developed a plan to come and make Jesus king by force! But Jesus withdrew by himself up the mountainside. And he sent his disciples away across the lake, where he would later meet them. The crowd let the disciples go and waited for Jesus to follow. But they never saw him come back down! The next day, they crossed the lake in some boats and came upon Jesus with his disciples in Capernaum. **"Rabbi, when did you get here?"** they asked. He had walked across the water at night, joining his disciples in the boat just before they reached the shore. But Jesus didn't explain that whole story. Instead, Jesus expressed disappointment. **"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."** How could Jesus be disappointed? A huge crowd had followed him for miles and were ready to acknowledge him as king. Wasn't it a great work of God? But Jesus rebuked the crowd for coming to him not in faith, but in hunger.

This point can be confusing because Jesus did indeed feed the crowd so that everyone was satisfied. But the people had misinterpreted Jesus' compassion and resulting miracle. They persisted in asking Jesus to feed them again. Perhaps they thought that by doing so, they were demonstrating their faith in Jesus. "I believe you can feed me again, Jesus!" But the faith that God will feed us is not faith in Jesus. Jesus himself proclaimed in Luke 12:24, **"Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!"** The fact is, God has fed us and continues to feed us. If we consider the ravens, we see that they do work for their food, in the sense that they don't stand on the ground, look up, and open their mouths! They fly around, they find dead carcasses to feed on, they fight with other

THE WORK OF GOD

ravens over their food, etc. We live in a world where we work for our food, which has been graciously and abundantly provided by the God of life. It is not faith to say to God or to his Son, “Feed me!” It is faith to say, as Jesus said when he broke the loaves before giving the pieces to the crowd, “Thanks.”

It seems clear from the crowd’s persistent requests of Jesus to feed them that they were fixed in their idea about what it means to have faith. And we shouldn’t be too smug as we consider their behavior, for this is our persistent struggle as well. As Jesus said, each day has enough trouble of its own. We are hard pressed to live in this world, and we long for the day when our toil in this world is done. We look forward to earning our chance to rest in retirement. But our challenges to live each day in the world don’t disappear when we retire! My mom and dad did their best to save up for their retirement and then enjoy an idyllic life in southern Oregon. But my dad was overcome by depression and committed suicide after only a few years in paradise. And the nest egg that they had saved up was eaten up and destroyed because of greedy men who caused several market crashes that wiped out their savings. My mom is tough, but she is often beset by terror at how she is going to live. Recently she has come to the realization that God has provided all she needed, and she has found some peace. Truthfully, God provides. But his provision says nothing about our faith. His provision is a testament to his goodness, which is poured out on the righteous and the unrighteous alike (Mt 5:45).

So, if we shouldn’t come to Jesus to be fed, for what should we come to him? Look at verse 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.”** Our daily bread is one thing, but the food that endures to eternal life is something else altogether! Where are we going to get that? Sometimes, it seems as though we could make food that lasts forever, like Twinkies. But, yuck! Jesus tells the crowd plainly that the only way that we can get food that endures to eternal life is through him, because he is the one on whom God the Father has placed his seal of approval. In our relationship with God, daily bread is a given, for which we must give thanks! But God has designated that it is only through his Son, Jesus Christ, that we have access to the food that endures to eternal life.

THE WORK OF GOD

The crowd heard Jesus tell them, “work for food that endures to eternal life.” So they asked the logical next question: **“What must we do to do the works God requires?”** Look at verse 29. **“Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.””** This verse is so simple as to be nearly impossible to understand. How can the work of God be to believe in the one he has sent? The crowd tried to make sense of it by returning to their original request. **“What sign then will you give us so that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. As it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.””** It was logical. What better way to get us to believe in him as the one who provides the bread from heaven than by providing us with bread here on earth, as Moses had done for the Israelites in the wilderness! But Jesus had already fed the crowd of 5000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. They weren’t looking for a sign. They were looking for a permanent handout. That is not the work of God. That is not the faith in Jesus that brings food that leads to eternal life.

Once again, Jesus used the crowd’s desire for bread to point them to the true bread that comes from heaven and gives life to the world. The people said, **“sir, always give us this bread.”** Look at verse 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. But as I told you, you have seen me, and still you do not believe.’”** With this promise, Jesus explained clearly what he meant by his teaching, **“the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”** The work of God is to come to Jesus as the bread of life. It is to come to him in faith and eat and drink the food that endures to eternal life. As he promised further in verse 40. **“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”** Jesus had already given the sign they needed to believe that his promises were true. But Jesus made it clear that a greater sign was to be given, in God’s time. For the bread that gives eternal life is Jesus the Lamb of God, who gave his life for the sin of the world. In verse 51 he proclaims, **“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.”** When we look to Jesus in faith as the sacrifice provided by God to take away our sin, we have done the work

THE WORK OF GOD

that God requires of us. And, Jesus, having reconciled us to God by his death, will raise us up as God's children for eternal life.

As Christians, this we believe. And yet, when it comes to speaking about the work of God or about doing the work of God, this is not typically what we say. Why is it so hard to take Jesus at his word here, and trust that the work of God is to believe him as the one God has sent? Honestly, I'm asking! I don't know the answer. I'm not sure that it's important to know the answer. What I think is most important is to meditate on what it means for us to just believe what Jesus is saying here.

First of all, Jesus equates faith with work. That is very hard to understand. But this is not the only place where he does so. For example, in John 8 Jesus taught the Jews who believed him, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** In John 14 Jesus told his disciples, **“Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”** And Peter proclaimed to the Jews at Pentecost, **“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”** The work of God that bears fruit for eternal life is to believe in Jesus, holding on to his words of promise and command. If we do so, then the Spirit of Jesus and of God is with us. As Paul says in Romans 8:11, **“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.”** The hard work that we must continue doing from now until the day of our death is to believe in Jesus as God's Son. But it is not a work that accomplishes anything from a worldly perspective. All the things that we do in an attempt to do God's work, such as faithful daily bread, testimony writing, Bible study, Bible teaching, preaching, and works of mercy and compassion, all of it, is somehow beside the point. The focus of all our efforts, all our strivings, should be to look at Jesus, come to Jesus, believe in Jesus. The spirit of Jesus will do the rest, both in us and through us. We must resist the urge to consider this laziness or dereliction of our spiritual duty. Let

THE WORK OF GOD

us believe Jesus' words that **“the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”** If we do this work faithfully, we will bear fruit that lasts and enjoy the food that endures to eternal life.

Secondly, this verse lays out a clear path for obeying the world mission command. In John 15, Jesus compares his disciples to branches, while he is the vine, and God the Father is the gardener. He challenged them to remain in him, because apart from him they could do nothing. But if they remained in him, and he in them, they would be empowered in their lives to bear much fruit for God's glory. And what is that fruit? According to the World Mission Command, it is disciples of Jesus, those who can do the work of God after us. I hope you can already see where I'm going with this. A disciple of Jesus is not one who can move mountains, prophetically teach, suffer hardship, or sacrificially give. A disciple of Jesus is one who loves Jesus and believes in him (1 Cor. 13:1-3). And the best way to raise disciples like that is to love Jesus and believe in him. When we do the work of God as Jesus teaches us in this passage, we make a dwelling place for his Spirit in this darkened world. And when his Spirit dwells among us, we are truly more than conquerors. In short, we obey the world mission command when we help others do the work of God by coming to Jesus and believing in him as the bread of life. Anyone can do that! How? By coming to Jesus and believing in him as the bread of life.

Today, I have challenged you and me to do the work of God by believing in Jesus as the one God has sent to be the bread of life through his death on the cross for our sins, and by his resurrection power as God's obedient Son. The work is hard, harder than physics or chemistry. We are so easily fooled into working for food that spoils. But your labor to make your body a dwelling place for his Spirit is not in vain.

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