

Easter Sunday: 8:30 breakfast, 9:00 baptism, 10:00 worship meeting

Sometimes our efforts to explain only leave people more confused. Several years ago someone was doing something in the kitchen—making toast or some such—and the food got burned. The smoke wasn't too bad, but you know how that smell of burned food just fills the room and can't be covered up? We opened windows and waved our arms around, but the smell obviously lingered because a few minutes later, one of my other boys came into the room, smelled the burned food, and said: "Something smells like... black."

He made the point, didn't he? Some explanations are like that—they don't quite fit your mental categories at first, but they work if you think about them a bit. Jesus does something like that in today's text. He compares being a Christian to something that's puzzling at first but deeply illuminating when you think about it and keep reading.

First though, I wonder what you would finish the statement "Being a Christian is like..."? You might say something like "It's like being in the best love relationship ever" or "It's like having the world's best life coach." Skeptics would say "Christianity is emotionally like carrying a huge sack of rocks around or intellectually like walking with crutches your whole life." John Newton said it's like being a man who has no money, but is allowed to draw all he needs from one infinitely rich.

In our text today, Jesus says being a Christian is **like eating really good bread**. Bread unlike any you've ever had before. Heavenly bread. Bread that nourishes and strengthens and satisfies you forever. Bread that gives your life meaning and joy. I know what some of you are thinking: "Any bread that amazing must be gluten free."

The key verse in this whole section is v35, where Jesus states His claim:

v35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

Everything else in this chapter explains, qualifies, or illustrates that central claim. In other words, **believing in Jesus is less like making an**

abstract, mental affirmation and more like eating a really good meal. Belief in Jesus happens when you realize your soul is hungry and nothing you've tried so far can satisfy. A spoonful of power, a mouthful of popularity, a serving of money, a bowful of romance. We might be satisfied for a few hours, a few weeks, a few years. But then we're hungry again and we're ready to try a different option at life's buffet. We keep thinking: "I know *that* didn't satisfy, but I'm sure *this* will..." It's only when you've realized that NONE of it will satisfy, can satisfy, ever really has satisfied that you finally come to the buffet Jesus serves up with your heart hungry and your plate empty and you ask, "May I?" And He says, "I'm glad you're here. I've prepared all this just for you. Eat up." THAT is what being a Christian is like, according to Jesus.

It's a long section of teaching, broken into 6 portions. The people ask a question and Jesus answers. There are many rich and important details here, but obviously we don't have time to delve into all of it. As we move into each section, I'll try to summarize Jesus' claim in a sentence.

1. Jesus gives "food that endures" vs. food that perishes.

vv25-27 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."²⁷ Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

Jesus criticizes their motivation for seeking Him out and challenges them to seek "the food that remains to eternal life" instead of "the food that perishes." They ate miracle food less than 24 hours earlier. But even that food – miraculously produced though it was – was still only normal, physical food. It filled their stomachs once, satisfied their appetites for a few hours, nourished their bodies for a few days, and was then gone forever. A few hours later, they needed more. We always do. But no single meal can satisfy your hunger for longer than a day. Jesus promises a food that endures, not for a day or a week or even a year. He offers to give "food that endures to eternal life."

In other words, it's not that their appetites are too strong but too weak. They are far too easily satisfied. Same with us. Our problem is,

we're not hungry enough. Jesus sets the table with eternal food, food that He says will satisfy forever... but we don't eat. Why not? We've already filled up with junk food. We live in a culture utterly devoted to helping us escape our feelings, especially the ones that feel like hunger—namely, boredom, discontent, longing, need. Western culture is religiously devoted to numbing those feelings at any cost, and it does a great job of offering us a whole smorgasbord of apps, games, and other distractions to keep us pacified. Friends, **one of the greatest enemies to your hunger for Jesus** might just be your phone. Or whatever else it is that you use to escape those feelings of emptiness in your soul. Challenge: For the next 2 weeks (between now and Easter), make it a point to notice your soul's "hunger pangs" and what you do with them. If you're really the aggressive type, fast from your favorite entertainment/distraction—Facebook, Instagram, sports on TV, Netflix. Just see what happens when you make yourself sit there and actually feel your feelings. See if by Easter your appetite for Jesus isn't stronger.

2. Jesus gives this food to anyone who believes.

vv28-29 *Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?"* ²⁹ *Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."*

They pick up on the word "work" from Jesus' exhortation: "Do not work for the food that perishes." They respond: "What should we do in order to work the work of God"—i.e., the works God requires (not the work God does). Jesus answers: "The only 'work' God seeks is faith. Believe in the Person that God sent, that is, believe in me."

Connecting this statement to what Jesus said earlier about the food that endures to eternal life yields an interesting conclusion. This is why I said earlier that **believing in Jesus is less like making a religious affirmation and more like eating a really good meal**. Jesus encourages them to "work for the food that endures to eternal life," and when they ask Him what that looks like, He tells them to believe in Him. In other words, believing in Jesus is like sinking your teeth into food that endures forever.

3. Jesus is the reality; other bread was always just a shadow.

vv30-33 *So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see*

and believe you? What work do you perform?" ³¹ *Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'* ³² *Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven.* ³³ *For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."*

The feeding of the 5000 was just enough to get their attention and associate Jesus with Moses in their minds. But now, the crowd expects something more spectacular than even Moses did.

Verse 4 tells us it was about the time of Passover. Verse 59 adds this whole dialogue took place in the synagogue in Capernaum. At this season of the year, the Jews would have been studying Scriptures that pertain to their departure from Egypt through the sea, flight into the desert, and God's provision of bread (Exodus 12-16).

Jesus answers them in v32 with a series of contrasts: The source of that was NOT Moses BUT my Father. That was back in the past, but this is now in the present. That was "bread from heaven," but this is "true bread from heaven"—i.e., we're moving from the past realm of shadows into the present realm of reality.

Moses himself knew the manna pointed to something greater, and he taught the people so:

Deuteronomy 8:3 *And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*

The manna was always a spiritual metaphor for how God feeds His people on His word. Real life requires more than mere physical food for our physical lives; life requires God!

...which is exactly what Jesus says in v33. He finally identifies the "bread of God" = "he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." In other words, Jesus doesn't merely *provide* bread from heaven; rather, He Himself *is* the true bread from heaven. We don't need Jesus merely to give *it* to us; we need Him to give *Himself* to us. Saving faith is coming to Jesus for Himself, not for something else.

Notice another aspect where Jesus is greater than OT shadow: He “gives life to the world.” The manna fed only Israel. That bread from heaven was exclusively connected to the Jewish race; but now, the bread of God ignores race and gives life to anyone, not on the basis of a place in the covenant family, but on the basis faith in Jesus.

4. Jesus Himself is the Bread of Life which satisfies all hunger.

vv34-35 *They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

The people ask for a continuous supply of meals: “Serve up this bread again and again.” But Jesus corrects their expectation: “I am the bread of life. Come and never be hungry again. Believe and never thirst.”

This is the first of 7 “I AM” statements in John:

- 8:12 light of the world
- 10:7,9 door/gate
- 10:11,14 Good shepherd
- 11:25 resurrection and life
- 14:6 way, truth, life
- 15:1,5 True Vine

In each of these statements, Jesus take something from Judaism and reinterprets it with Himself.

Jewish tradition taught that there was a storehouse of manna in heaven that had been opened to feed the nation during their years in the wilderness and would be opened again to feed them during the age of the Messiah (cf. 2 Baruch 29:8, Midrash Rabbah Eccles 1:9 – cited in Burge, 197). The people are yearning for heavenly bread, which the rabbis interpreted as the life-sustaining presence of God. Jesus shows up and claims to be that precious gift. People who come to Him—i.e., who believe in Him—no longer have the core emptiness that characterized their former life. Their encounter with Jesus meets that need forever.

NOTE: There is a section of 10-11 verses here—vv36-46—which describe the dynamics of how and why people actually come to faith in Jesus. I will preach this section on its own next week. For now, just four

summary comments:

1. In the face of such a grand offer, why do so many reject Him? That’s what verses 36-46 explain.
2. It’s not a failure on Jesus’ part. God’s saving purposes will not be frustrated, no matter how many reject Jesus.
3. When the Jews grumble, Jesus does not defend Himself; He simply returns to the problem of their spiritual receptivity (v44ff).
4. God’s sovereignty over salvation does not mitigate human responsibility at all. In fact, Jesus continues to strenuously offer the bread of life to any who will come.

More on that next week!

5. Jesus is the Bread of Life because He gives Himself up to death.

vv47-51 *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."*

One detail we missed by skipping those middle verses is the explanation of “eternal life” Jesus offers there. Notice how often He pairs “eternal life” with resurrection:

vv39-40 *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 on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*

v44 *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.*

v54 *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

Jesus isn’t talking about mere immortality, eternal existence. He’s offering eternal LIFE = real living, real meaning. Eternal life is acceptance with God. It’s resurrection life, passing from condemnation to glory.

Notice how it comes (v51): “for the life of the world” – clearly talking about the cross. That Greek word “for” is often used in sacrificial contexts in John (10:11,15 “lays down his life for the sheep” / 11:51 “Jesus would die for the nation” / 15:13 “Greater love has no man than

this, that someone lays down his life for his friends”). “For” in this sense means “in the place of.”

Think about this in connection with the Bread of Life metaphor. Bread has to be broken, crushed, digested to be any benefit to you. Seeing it doesn’t nourish you. Holding it, admiring it, recognizing the benefit it could be for you doesn’t help you. Intact bread can’t nourish you. If Jesus was only an example, a teacher, He’s of no real benefit to you. Jesus says “I was decimated like the bread has to be decimated, crushed like the bread has to be crushed, bruised for your iniquity, chastised for your transgressions.” If you say “Jesus, I’m hurting make me better” the bread won’t do much for you. But if you come and say “I’m a rebel and should have been broken, but you were broken in my place” then and only then can He become the Bread of Heaven for you.

6. Jesus is our very food for life.

vv52-58 *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* ⁵³ *So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* ⁵⁴ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* ⁵⁵ *For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.* ⁵⁶ *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* ⁵⁷ *As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.* ⁵⁸ *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."*

Is this Communion? Does the bread and wine literally become the body and bread of Jesus? NO.

1. Jesus is standing right there among them. It strains language beyond the point of credibility to imagine He was referring to His literal flesh.
2. The emphasis in the chapter on believing (vv 29,30,35,36,40,47,64, 69) and coming (vv 35,37,44,45,65). Even when works are mentioned in the passage, Jesus is emphatic—the work of God is to believe in the One He sent (v29). In fact, v54 and v40 are very close:
v40 “...everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”
v54 “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

3. Jesus’ initial language mingles metaphor with non-metaphor: Jesus is the bread of life, but it’s the person who comes to him and believes in him who is satisfied. This provides a baseline for how we read the rest of the passage when the later teaching becomes more strictly metaphorical. When Jesus says we must eat His flesh (vv53-56), He has already established His meaning by what He’s said earlier.
4. The language in vv51-57 is so emphatic, it cannot be adding to what Jesus (and the rest of the Bible) says elsewhere. What Jesus says here is completely unqualified; therefore, if it is referring to the Lord’s Supper, we must conclude that the *one thing* necessary for eternal life is to participate in that ceremony. Either this contradicts that or it reiterates that. It cannot be something added.
5. This passage contains repeated stress on the initiative of God in saving souls, leaving no room for a magical understanding of the Lord’s Supper that works at the initiative of the participant. God is not under constraint to some ceremony—eat the bread and win eternal life.

So what is Jesus saying? “**John 6 is not about the Lord’s Supper; rather, the Lord’s Supper is about what is described in John 6.**” (Carson, quoting Colin Brown, *NIDNTT*, 2:535). In other words, Jesus is describing a larger, greater reality here than Communion itself—something Communion merely pictures. Namely, the satisfaction Jesus offers His followers and the profound dependence they have upon Him. He is their very food for life. It’s what the Lord’s Supper pictures and Jesus Himself describes here in John 6.

All of this language becomes a metaphor for the type of interior life we should have with Jesus Christ. Communion, deep sharing, His life taken deeply into mine and digested, my nourishment, my strength.

How can I find bread that lasts forever? How can I discover transcendence or spiritual nurture? How can I discover God in a way that will not diminish before my next meal? Jesus said, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

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