

The Work of God

John 6:22-71

²⁴ So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

²⁵ 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 work 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."

²⁸ 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."

³⁰ 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."

³⁴ 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.

³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe.

³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.

³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.

³⁹ 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."

Prophetic Manna

Listen to some passages from ancient texts that relate to John 6. “And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time” (2 Baruch 29:8). “But they who honour the true, eternal God shall inherit life, dwelling forever in the fair garden of Paradise, feasting on sweet bread from the starry heaven” (SibOr 3:49—Fragment 3). Finally, “As was the first Redeemer, so shall be the final Redeemer, as the first Redeemer caused the manna to fall from heaven, even so shall the second Redeemer cause the manna to fall” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1.9). The amazing thing about these passages is that most scholars believe they were all written by non-Christian Jews a little before,¹ or after² the earthly life of Christ. Let that

¹ The Sibylline text here is a fragment that probably belongs to the third Sibylline Oracle which is dated second century B.C.

sink in for a moment. Here we have clear Jewish expectations that manna will come down in the end times, that eternal life will be accessible through it, and that it will come from a second Redeemer in succession to the first Redeemer: Moses.³

It is remarkable enough that one or more of these texts could have been written prior to Christ's coming. It is even more remarkable that Jews would have such an expectation after Christ's coming, especially in light of John 6. Basically, the passage before us today is Jesus telling the Jews that he is the Redeemer, the Manna from heaven, who gives eternal life. All of this they were expecting. **But they would not believe him or in him** no matter what he did for them. They were expecting exactly what he gave (in theory), but they would not take what he gave, because it didn't come on their terms. They were full of unbelief.

Substitute Manna

Perhaps the greatest danger of unbelief is that it can fool a person into thinking it actually is believing, when in fact it is looking to something else that it is **a close substitute** for the real thing. Saccharine is not sugar; margarine is not butter, manna from earth is not manna from heaven. All are substitutes that masquerade as the real thing. What are the substitutes in this passage that hinder belief in Christ? What is the substitute manna? Let's take a look at them.

² 2 Baruch is generally dated late first or early second century A.D.

³ See Darrell Bock, *Jesus According to the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 450. Also, Darrell Bock and Gregory Herrick, *Jesus in Context: Background readings for Gospel Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 216-17.

Physical Pleasure

Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (vs. 26). You ate your fill of the loaves. Physical pleasure and satisfaction. It caused the people to seek after Christ, but it did not cause them to seek Christ. They ran after him, but they did not run to him. The sign was right in front of their eyes, but they did not, they would not, see it. It was a mighty miracle, but they didn’t for a minute think to look at why the miracle might be occurring. Why did Jesus feed them? No one bothered to ask that question. Signs are things that point to something. But they did not think to look at what this sign pointed to.

Calvin says, “They sought in Christ something else than Christ himself.” This is a strange contradiction and Jesus is going to point it out clearly to them. Basically, the idea is that a person can seek Christ and yet in that seeking of Christ not be seeking Christ. In this the heart can be greatly deceptive. How can this be? How can you seek Christ and yet not be seeking Christ?

The answer is they looked to their own bellies, and their physical hunger caused them to seek Christ. But it was a spurious seeking, a false seeking of Christ. The Apostle says, “For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things” (Php 3:18-19).

He says this about people *in the church*. The people seeking Jesus wanted a genie, not Jesus. The way “genie” is used in American pop culture (I dream of Jeannie, Aladdin, etc), you can see that the people only wanted Jesus for what he could give them (three wishes). They only wanted to use Jesus for their own ends. If he wouldn’t give them what they wanted, then off with his head.

I’ve often noticed in prayer meetings (not so much in our church, thankfully), how people basically treat Jesus in their prayers just like a genie. If ACTS (adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication) is a good acronym for prayer, too many Christians only pray “S.” Have you ever been to a prayer meeting like this, where 50 minutes of the hour meeting are spent asking each other what to prayer for and ten minutes given over to actually praying. Then they pray for Sally’s cat and Fred’s bad stomach (after he ate three greasy McDonald’s Big Macs). Some prayers will be about relatively unimportant things, some asking God to override our bad decisions, and some over very good and meaningful things. But how much of the time in prayer is spent asking God to do this or that, with little or perhaps no time given to adoring him, confessing sin, and thanking him? This can very easily be using Jesus to fill your belly, to get what you want out of him. It is a kind of example of seeking Jesus but not really seeking him. It is not wrong to ask for things, but prayer is primarily about worship and fellowship, and too often in our prayers, we use Jesus rather than worship him.

Misunderstanding the Kingdom

A second substitute for Christ is related to the first. It is **thinking about Christ's kingdom in purely physical terms**. When we do this, we can end up rejecting eternal life itself. Such is the seriousness of this substitute. The substitute is full of bad theology and eyes that only think of here and now. It is a failure to care about eternity.

Jesus tells them, **“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” (vs. 27)**. **D. A. Carson** writes, **“When Jesus tells the people not to work for food that spoils, he is rebuking their purely materialistic notions of the kingdom.”**⁴ You wonder where he gets this talk about the “kingdom” from, and the answer is found back in **vs. 15**. **“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself” (John 6:15)**. If they want to make Jesus their **king**, then they have to be thinking about the **kingdom** of God. But the kingdom they have in mind is one that is perishing. They are not thinking about eternal things.

You can see easily enough how this relates to seeking Christ for what he can give you here and now. Perhaps no nation in world history outside of Israel itself has been so prone to confusing the kingdom of God with the kingdom of man than the United States of America. And so perhaps

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 284.

Christ's words about working for food that perishes has more to say to us with respect to the kingdom than any other people.

Let's think about our country for a moment. I'm not going to pretend that this is not a complicated issue. Surely it is. Nor will I ever suggest that human kingdoms should be run and governed by man-made rules. It is also clear that the United States at its inception was built upon an idea of objective natural law and that the Ten Commandments were the benchmark of this law.

But **the United States is not a Christian nation** and never has been. It may have had deeply and overtly Christian law, but the only Christian nation that exists is the church. Peter says that **the church is "a holy nation"** (**1 Pet 2:9**). The church, not the state. "America" is not a holy nation, and never was, because throughout its existence, the majority of her citizens have been non-professing people. It has been one of the great mistakes of history to merge the church into the state. They are not the same thing. Since Christ came to our world in the flesh, Christians have been in many nations. Some nations have been better at reflecting God's law back to him than others (this was true even prior to Christ's coming as well). But no nation is a Christian nation. This is a confusion of the eternal with that which is passing away. This is why it can be so dangerous to your soul, and why obsession with a country can become a false seeking of Christ.

We can be grateful for our own nation's tolerance and even promotion of many Christian things. We can be thankful for

millions of Christians that have been involved in making our nation what it once was. We can thank God for the almost unending blessings he has bestowed upon us. We can be saddened by what our land has now become, because Christians have lost their way and everyone now does what is right in his own eyes. We can fight for better laws and lawmakers. We are citizens of the United States.

But our true citizenship is in heaven, and Christ is the King of an eternal kingdom. We are also citizens of this kingdom. Believers always have been. Abraham went to the Promised Land, not because he saw as the end, but because he recognized it as a sign and a type. “He was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

In Jesus, this city has come down to earth now, but do you see it? He is not the king tomorrow, when he comes in an earthly millennium for a thousand years. He is king today, and he reigns today. “He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:25). “He put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph 1:22).

But his kingdom is not like other kingdoms which are passing away. As he told Nicodemus, you must be born again to see this kingdom of God (John 3:3). As he will say later, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Yet, we learn that this kingdom is “near” (Luke 21:31) and “in our midst” (Luke 17:21). You have come to it this very day, with the

gathering of the saints around the throne of God. Do you see it? So what Christ commands us to do here is to look for food that endures to eternal life, to go after this food as much passion as we can.

Focus on your relationship with Christ. How do you do that? What kind of prayers do you pray? We've already discussed that. How about your knowledge of him? Do you think often of him? What do you think about him? Focus on your knowledge of him. Focus on obedience to him wherever you are. Think about the eternal well being of yourself and others. Focus on teaching your children in the way they should go, of training them up in the ways of God, of making sure they understand the law and the gospel. Focus on making the church what you wish other people would make it. Focus on helping one another, on loving one another, on encouraging one another in all these things. Focus on being a light in your work with both your mouth and your hands. Think about the continuity between this world and the next. Be good citizens today and honor King Jesus. Do your work in a way that would please Christ. Be content people that are looking forward rather than downward. Focus on treasures that are stored where the moth does not eat and weather does not corrode. The days are dark and the season is short, perhaps shorter than any of us can possibly imagine.

Works Righteousness

And yet, be careful, for even these good things can potentially become a third substitute. Doing good and being

good can actually be a false seeking, if you are not careful. Jesus speaks here about “[work](#).” In fact “work” is the theme of [vv. 27-30](#). The word occurs in all four verses. Jesus starts by saying, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life” ([vs. 27](#)). They ask him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ([vs. 28](#)). Jesus says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” ([vs. 29](#)). They respond, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?” ([vs. 30](#)). The third substitute for Christ is trying to merit God’s favor through your works.

Why would Jesus bring up “works” here? I believe it goes back to their seeking to make him a king. This is the “work” they were seeking to accomplish. It is why he ran away from them the night before. Their work was not his work. Their work is a curious work, because it is a religious work. Religious work seems right to us to do. But it was a work based on a wrong understanding of the kingdom and upon an inability to look to eternal things. Be careful that your work that you do is based upon proper understanding. At heart, all human works or seeking after God is the inability to understand how to enter eternity properly. Works are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and what his kingdom is like.

Jesus tells them that the food that they are to “work” for is actually given to them. “[The son of man will give \[it\] to you](#)” ([vs. 27](#)). Now, [if something is given to you, then you do not](#)

work for it. It is a gift. Vs. 27 presents a paradox. “Work” for that which Christ will “give.” But people can’t comprehend the gift. Neither can they comprehend the Giver. “For on him God the Father has set his seal” (vs. 27). They understand neither the gift nor the Giver.

First, they misunderstand the gift. They say, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God” (vs. 28). Let’s focus on this phrase “works of God.” It is clear here that “works of God,” at least in their minds, is the law. It does not refer to the works that God does, but to the works that he requires, for they believe that they can and/or must do them. In fact, the coming discussion on bread and manna is completely wrapped up in the Jewish misunderstanding of the Law. John puts a new spin on it, the correct spin. Let me explain.

In vs. 31, the people bring up “the manna in the wilderness.” Jesus responds by calling himself “the bread from heaven” (vs. 32) which gives “life to the world” (vs. 33). Again, this is all wrapped up in Exodus theology, even as the whole chapter has been. Even the idea of “life” is found in the stories of old. “I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God ... then you shall live” (Deut 30:15-16).

This refers to the law, and the law was the focus of life for the Jews. When they interpreted Exodus, the Rabbis taught things like this: “The voice...gave life to Israel who accepted the Torah” and “God said to Moses: Say to Israel: The words

of the Torah which I have given to you are life unto you.”⁵

The Jews could not accept Jesus’ interpretation of himself as “bread from heaven” because that’s what the Torah is. Law is the bread. Every good Jew knew that.

They therefore misunderstand the gift (eternal life), because they misunderstand the Giver. John 6 reorients our thoughts that it is not the law, but the Giver of the Law that is the source of life. Look at how Jesus works this out. “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” (vs. 32). Whether it is the actual manna or the law, the Father is the Giver, not Moses. One must look to God the Father, not to Moses for life. But one must look to the true Bread, and not a substitute. Not to the law, but to the Son of Man. Not to the miracle of the food and the fullness that comes in the belly, but to Jesus Christ. Who did the Father send as life-giver? Not the law, but the Son. “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (33).

So, religious works, the works of the law, man-made work or God commanded works are not the food that gives life. This is the fundamental distinction made in Scripture. It is a distinction that almost everyone in our day utterly confuses. People must come to a proper understand of this. The law does not give life. It never did. Obedience is not food unto

⁵ Tanhuma Shemoth 25; Mek Ex. 15:26; Ex. R. 29:9; cf. Deut R. 7:3. Cited in Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1965), 148.

eternal life. Rather, the law brings a curse ([Gal 3:10](#)) and the letter kills ([2 Cor 3:6](#)). Its whole purpose was to point to increase our sin ([Rom 5:20](#)) and show us our need for the Savior, the True Bread from Heaven. This is not only the teaching of Paul, but of Christ right here. When we do not use law properly, we destroy the Gospel. When we destroy the Gospel, we short-circuit the only true power of God unto salvation. And when we do that, how can people be saved?

This is how serious is it when Christians mess up the law and the gospel, especially preachers from pulpits. People's eternal lives hang in the balance here, but most of the hearers have no idea, even as these people have no idea. For we pursue what seems right to us, and what seems right to us is the question the people ask here, not Jesus' response. "What must we do, to be doing" ([28](#)). "What are the works God wants us to do?" Works become our main substitute, and we end up perishing eternally.

But God has provided a way wherein we might be saved without doing works. Jesus' response to their question is curious, and I believe it has a double meaning. "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent" ([vs. 29](#)). I've been pondering this statement for weeks. First, notice the [shift from the plural](#) "works" to the [singular](#) "work." "What must we do, to be going the *works* of God" becomes "This is the *work* of God." While the plural "works" is clearly a reference to human works, it is this singular "work" that I think has a double meaning.

The first meaning follows in line with their question. What must we do? Jesus' response is "here is what you must do." Calvin might surprise you here, but he speaks for many Reformed commentators when he says, "Those who infer from this passage that faith is the gift of God are mistaken; for Christ does not now show what God produces in us, but what he wishes and requires from us." But listen to his explanation,

Christ reminds them of one work, that is, *faith*; by which he means that all that men undertake without *faith* is vain and useless, but that *faith* alone is sufficient, because *this* alone does God require from us, *that we believe*. For there is here an implied contrast between *faith* and the *works* and *efforts* of *men*; as if he had said, Men toil to no purpose, when they endeavour to please God without *faith*, because, by running, as it were, out of the course, they do not advance towards the goal. This is a remarkable passage, showing that, though men torment themselves wretchedly throughout their whole life, still they lose their pains, if they have not *faith* in Christ as the rule of their life [italics in commentary].⁶

Many people can't grasp how faith could be a work that is opposed to works, because they view faith in an Arminian/semi-Pelagian sense. As R. C. Sproul put it, "The supreme good work is to place one's trust in Jesus Christ" citing **John 6:29** and so view the final decision for our salvation as resting upon human choice, not upon divine action.⁷ Jesus will counter this Arminianism in a moment. Or you can view it from a Reformed position, which is the position Jesus speaks

⁶ Calvin, on John 6:29.

⁷ *Tabletalk Magazine: September 1989* (Lake Mary, FL: Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 1989), 34.

of just before, when he says that this food is something that “he” gives.

Calvin’s focus is on us, not God. Belief is John’s chosen term, not faith. And belief is something that you do. *You* must believe. Your parents do not believe for you. Your pastor does not believe for you. God does not do it for you. This is human responsibility, and when people refuse to believe in Christ, they do not enter into eternal life, but the wrath of God remains on them.

Yet, faith is something that is in fact given by God, and in this sense, it is God’s work. God gives it. You exercise it. This is the double meaning. I think Calvin goes too far saying that we cannot say that faith is a gift of God here. There is a double meaning in these words as **Martin Luther** noticed (putting backwards), “**God’s work is not only what we do but also what God does as God.**”⁸ The whole passage from faith as “a gift” to those who will believe demonstrates this.

But let us be careful as we proceed. You need to think clearly and properly here. To whom does God give this bread from heaven? This also has a double sense. The first is a physical sense, a sacramental sense. In a physical sense, he gives this food to everyone. Christ came to “the world.” Jesus’ performed his miracle of multiplying food for many that would never believe. He really did give it to them. He identified this with himself, as a sign that pointed to himself. The people said that they wanted this bread that God gives (**vs. 34**). Jesus

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 23: Sermons on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 6-8*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), Jn 6:29.

identifies himself as clearly as possible as this Bread that they seek saying, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (vs. 35).

But this involves faith or believing. And this involves coming to Christ the right way. Vs. 36 affirms that Christ indeed came to them in a physical sense. But since they only wanted a physical Christ, that’s all the farther his coming to them would be. It was a real coming, a coming of himself to them, a feeding of himself to them, but it stopped short of what they truly needed. The most this food could do for them is feed their bellies, which it in fact did. Even this is a gracious act on God’s part. It is this feeding of himself truly that causes them to be responsible for rejecting him and which holds out a genuine offer of himself to them.

Yet, God comes to some in a second way, a spiritual way. It is through a special calling, and effectual calling, and a peculiar sending of Christ to them. Thus, he clears up any of our Arminian or semi-Pelagian thoughts about this “work of faith” saying, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out” (vs. 37). While he really came to them, they must also come to him. But how do they come? John is interested here is something difficult for many to accept. This is one of those passages that has caught the attention of more than one person who is dealing with the doctrines of grace.

Unlike **John 3:16** which is not concerned with election, where there are two groups (the “world” and its subset “those who believe”), in our passage now, “**whoever comes**” is the same group as “**all that the Father gives**” for it is connected in the middle by “**will come to me.**” Notice the argument. “**All that the Father gives me will come to me.**” Then, “**whoever comes to me I will never cast out.**” For emphasis, Jesus adds to this that the Father’s will is that Christ should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day (**vs. 39**). And **verse 40** now sounds like John 3:16 but adding the resurrection now, “**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.**” There are parallels between John 3:16 and John 5:40, and there are dissimilarities as well.

John 3:16 speaks of the revealed will. But here, we are necessarily talking about God’s sovereign will. The revealed will is that everyone should believe upon Christ. The revealed will speaks of his physical coming to the earth and feeding even unbelievers with physical food as a sign that points to himself. The sovereign will—which is incomprehensibly gracious—is that some in fact will believe upon him. No one should ever come to him because their sin prevents them, but some do because of **election**. “**All that the Father gives me will come to me**” becomes “**whoever comes to me I will never cast out**” which becomes “**this is the will of him who sent me, that I**

should lose nothing that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

In thinking on this last part (I should lose), you need to think, not as we have been thinking, that is, of faith being God’s gift to you through Christ. Rather, think of you as the Father’s gift to Christ! This is what Jesus now implies. We have seen the gift that we are given which is faith, and faith unites us to Christ. The Father has given us Christ as a gift. But now, we become the gift that the Father gives to his only begotten son. The way to think of this is the [marriage of Christ to the church](#). The Father has given the church to Christ as his bride. If it is inconceivable that God would give sinners the gift of Christ, perhaps it is more inconceivable that God would then want these newly formed people to become Christ’s gift.

This is the very heart of salvation we are talking about, and it is the gospel. Amazingly, this is Christ’s work! They asked him what “work” will you do that we may believe? This is his answer. It is a better answer than the miracle sign that should have been enough. They had also asked, “[What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you?](#)” ([vs. 30](#)). Such a question is amazing given the first 15 verses of this chapter (wasn’t the miracle already a huge sign?), and it shows the true hardened and deceived nature of a person unwilling to believe in Christ.

He performs this incredible miracle. It is a miracle even greater than the Manna in wilderness, a miracle that they were actually expecting the second Redeemer to perform. He

performs it, but they can't see it. *Incredibly*, they can't see it. They knew he just did a miracle, yet they didn't know what the miracle was. They didn't have the eyes of faith. They had too many substitutes that passed themselves off as the Real McCoy.

Bread From Heaven

Now he says that he gives them an even greater work. His work is not finished with the feeding miracle. This work is not a feeding with physical multiplied food, but of himself, eternal food giving eternal life. It is a feeding of himself: the Bread of Heaven. Only those who are being called and who have tasted of Christ can truly understand this work of his, for they have seen it and known it personally. Because he would not do it for everyone, the passage goes on to say that “**they grumbled about him.**” He wasn't their genie. He wasn't their political king. He wasn't the god of their own making.

But he is God and he does things on his terms. His terms are the terms of the Father in heaven. The promise is held out in **verse 35**, “**I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.**” In this day of physical obesity living parallel to mass spiritual starvation, may God be pleased to feed you with the Bread from Heaven. If you have been fed this food, you will know what he is talking about and rejoice. If not, he offers it to you

now free of cost. Will you respond in faith? If you do, he will by no means ever cast you out.