

Do not work for food that spoils
Kingham Harvest 27/9/2009
Readings: John 6v25-59

Introduction

Harvest is traditionally the time when we celebrate the provision of our daily bread.

All the necessities of life we so easily take for granted.

And give thanks to God for his provision and for all who work so hard to make that provision possible.

There are some great funny sayings about work.

‘Hard work never killed anybody, but why take a chance?’

‘If hard work were such a wonderful thing, surely the rich would have kept it all to themselves.’

‘Hard work is the key to success, but most people would rather pick the lock.’

And my all-time favourite: ‘I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours.’

But because our society is so heavily based on what is known as the Protestant Work Ethic, we’re used to loads more sayings that are serious:

‘Idle hands do the Devil’s work.’

Finish this one for me: ‘No bees, no honey; no work, no [money].’

‘Every day I get up and look through the Forbes list of the richest people in America. If I’m not there, I go to work.’

How about this from Martin Luther King: ‘Whatever your life’s work is, do it well. A man should do his job so well that the living, the dead, and the unborn could do it no better.’

No pressure, then!

The meaning is clear and I think it is true: without industrious labour there will be no life — no means to feed, clothe, house, and educate a family or oneself.

And in the midst of that constant encouragement to work Jesus says in John 6v7: ‘Do not work for food that spoils...’

And Jesus didn’t mean it’s just food that’s ruled out: that working for clothes and homes and cars is okay.

Anything that spoils, anything that wears out, that’s of no eternal worth — all that is ‘food that spoils.’

‘Do not work for food that spoils.’

Do not work for houses, for clothes, cars, books, sporting gear, iPods, mobiles, laptops, holidays... that spoil.

Crises of Spiritual Discovery

Now we are in a precarious place, because you believe in your heart it is good to work in order to buy food, don’t you?

The necessities of life?

And yet you hear Jesus say, “Do not work for food that spoils.”

And no, he didn’t mean stick to frozen ready meals!

The preacher John Piper calls moments like this ‘a crisis of spiritual discovery’.

The word ‘crisis’ means a turning point for better or worse; it could go either way. I’d call it something like ‘a battle of two wills’.

And as one of those two wills belongs to Almighty God, who breathed out every word of Scripture, then you know you’re in for a fight.

And don’t you often feel like fighting when you read bits in God’s Word that you don’t like?

A ‘crisis of spiritual discovery’ happens whenever you read your Bible and you disagree with what God says there.

And you will.

As you probably did here when you heard Chris read Jesus saying, “Do not work for food that spoils.”

Because of this ‘crisis of spiritual discovery’, you can discover in the next few minutes whether, and if so how much, you really do believe that Jesus is Lord.

Because there are two very different attitudes you may be experiencing right now.

One is resistance and hardness; it’s what I called ‘the fight’, when you know the Bible’s wrong.

You may be thinking, ‘Well, I don’t care what Jesus meant; I don’t agree. He’s wrong!’

For you, the Bible may be wrong on loads of issues.

The other attitude you may be experiencing right now is a humble, open submission to Jesus.

If you believe that Jesus is God, and the Bible is accurate, you may be quietly praying something like this:

‘Well, Lord, I never thought that it might be wrong to work for food. But there is nothing I want more than to do what pleases you. I know how twisted my thinking can be because of sin in my heart, so please help me understand your surprising command here, and make me willing to obey gladly. Lord, you are Lord; you are Boss.’

There’s a world of difference between those two attitudes.

The first one is an arrogant, human-centred response that we all recognise in ourselves.

You feel big but look small!

The second one is the work of the Holy Spirit, fragrant with God’s grace; it looks and sounds and smells like Jesus.

It’s not naïve, saying black is white, but it is thoughtfully ready to say, ‘Anything, Jesus, anything, in my mind or in my behaviour, I am willing to change if you say the word.’

Jesus warned that we must be very careful how we react to what he says:

‘Therefore take heed how you hear, for to him who has, will more be given, but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away’. Luke 8:18.

With a wrong attitude, you can lose the Christian understanding that you started out with.

So, let’s just stop for a moment and ask God’s help in prayer.

Work to Feast on Jesus

So why does Jesus say ‘Do not work for food that spoils...’?

Well, I think that his emphasis in v27 is the positive statement, ‘[work] for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.’

Jesus, the day before, had performed the miracle of feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.

When the people find him the next day, he accuses them in verse 26 of not coming because they had seen the sign but because of the free food.

In other words, they weren't interested that Jesus' miracle pointed to the spiritual nourishment people need so badly and which Jesus came to give.

To use the language of the apostle Paul, they set their minds on things of the flesh, not things of the Spirit.

So Jesus is saying, ‘Don't focus on filling your stomachs, focus on eternal, spiritual, food’.

‘What do you need to imbibe in order to live forever?’

They respond in verse 28 with complete misunderstanding, ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’

Jesus answers in verse 29 – and this is so vitally important for every one of us here – that the works God requires of you and me is in fact no work at all:

‘Believe in the one [God] has sent’, Jesus says.

Come to me, trust me, feed on me; draw life from me, and you'll have the food that endures to eternal life.

You'll imbibe what you need in order to live forever.

Then step-by-step he unfolds what he means.

v35: ‘I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.’

Jesus himself is the source of eternal life.

Coming to Jesus and trusting him is what it means to eat the true bread of heaven.

Then in verse 51 he gets very specific: ‘I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever.’

‘What bread?’, they must have wondered.

He continues: ‘This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’

Jesus is clear that eating living bread means nourishing our souls on the benefits of Jesus' atoning death on the cross.

We don't simply come and follow a good teacher.

We pin all our hopes on the forgiveness that he purchased for us in laying down his life.

In fact, in verse 53 Jesus goes so far as to say ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’

Do you see what this means for you?

You and I will only be truly alive, when the love for you that his death shows, and the sure and certain hope of eternal life that it secures for you, is what delights and satisfies your soul's hunger.

The you will start to live; then you will live forever.

But it's no more a one-off than eating food is.

This spiritual feeding on Christ is what the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, symbolises.

But Jesus wasn't thinking of Communion here.

He was talking about your and my relationship with him.

We need to be taking our spiritual nourishment from Jesus himself day after day, year after year, like food and drink.

Are you doing that?

Working for, focussing your life on, ‘the food that endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give you’?

In other words is Jesus and the Bible, which he called the Word of God, what you live for?

Or do you really live for material goods, people's good opinions, stuff that spoils?

Let's be very direct here: what would you most miss if it was taken away from you?

Your financial security?

Your family?

Stuff in your homes, gardens and garages?

Your good name?

Or the time you spend every day with your Lord, talking to him and hearing him talk to you through your Bible?

It's like what he said in the Sermon on the Mount:

‘Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.’ Mat 6:19

Anything temporal that the heart can treasure, even things like prestige and power — all this is ‘food that spoils.’

It will be worthless at death and useless on judgment day.

So Jesus says, ‘Don't work for things like that.’

But nowhere does Jesus show contempt for work.

He said of his own disciples, as he sent them out, ‘the worker deserves his wages’.

Luke 10:7

We should work to provide for our own and others' needs.

St. Paul taught the same thing.

‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat’ 2 Thessalonians 3:10.

Evidently then, Jesus does not mean stop working for a living, but rather, in your work, set your eyes on something other than ‘food that spoils.’

Again in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, 'seek first [God's] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' Matthew 6:33

Don't focus on 'food that spoils.'

God will supply that – food, drink, clothes.

You seek God's kingdom, his rule in your life and world.

Don't expend the effort of your mind and your body to satisfy yourself with stuff.

Expend your effort instead with a view to seeing God exalted.

Application to Religious and work Life

Let me try to apply this to two areas of our lives: our religious life and our work life.

First, our religious life.

Notice the connection between verses 26 and 27 — 'you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils...'

They were seeking Jesus and believed in his miracles.

And yet Jesus said they were 'work[ing] for food that spoils'.

The lesson for us is this: it is possible to seek Jesus and believe in his power, but be lost and worldly-minded.

It's possible to be a regular churchgoer and still never seek the 'food that endures to eternal life'.

Or it's possible to have been feeding on him in the past, but to have slowly let other things take his place.

Jesus urges us to examine ourselves, to see whether we really are feasting spiritually on the Lord we say we love.

I often begin my prayers by reading the end of Psalm 139:

'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' V23f

That's Psalm 139, last 2 verses, give it a go.

The second application is to our work life, paid or not.

How do you not work for the bread that spoils?

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:30f that this is how Christians should live:

'From now on ... those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.'

Yes work, but not for the food that spoils.

Purchase what you need, but hang loose to it.

Do your business dealings, but stay free from them.

Don't get up each morning for money and stuff that won't last past your death and won't survive Judgment Day.

Suppose you are a Christian stockbroker and watched the markets tumble last year.

What it means to you not to work for the food which spoils is that your life, what really matters to you, isn't jeopardised, by the FTSE index!

You weren't working for the bread that spoils so when it spoiled somewhat, you weren't totally thrown by that event.

Your goal has been to see Christ exalted in the way you work.

To pray and work and speak for others to come to know and love him as you do.

And, in fact, that can often happen even better in a Bear market than in Bull market!

People are often more open to 'food that endures to eternal life', the message of the

Christian gospel, when they are most aware that the other stuff spoils.

Out there today are countless people who have discovered for the first time in their lives that stuff spoils.

Who is going to tell them about the stuff that never spoils?

Conclusion

Jesus said in John 4 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about... My food [what really keeps me going] is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.' v32 & 34

Is that your food, what motivates you?

What you're living for and focussing on?

Or does your food have a short shelf life.

'Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.'

Let us pray.