

John Chapters 6-7: Jesus the Bread of Life

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on John

John's telling of the feeding of the five thousand echoes many of the themes we saw in the wedding feast at Cana. Again, Jesus works to sustain life in the present world, even as the sign points toward the ultimate life he alone can offer. John 6:27-29, however, poses a particular challenge for the theology of work:

"Do not work for food that perishes, but for food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you...This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

At first, Jesus appears to issue a direct command not to work. This is a matter of context. In John 6 people wanted to keep Jesus around to serve as a Magical Baker, who will keep the loaves coming. Thus when Jesus says, "You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26), he is rebuking their spiritual shortsightedness. They ate the bread, but they were unable to see what this sign signified.

Eternal life comes not from an unending supply of food, but from the living Word who proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus ceases the preliminary work (serving loaves) when it no longer results in the desired end product (relationship with God). Any competent worker would do the same. If adding more salt ceases to make the soup taste better, a decent cook stops adding salt. Jesus doesn't mean for his listeners to stop working, but merely to stop working for more stuff when more stuff isn't what you need.

Who among us doesn't need to hear that truth again every day?

What is the difference between food that perishes and food that endures for eternal life? According to Jesus, food that perishes is food that merely fills you up. It satisfies the immediate need, but nothing more. As applied to the workplace, this could be working just for the paycheck, with no concern for the value of the work itself. By contrast, working for food that endures for eternal life, is analogous to work that accomplishes God's purposes.

Belief is not mere intellectual assent. It includes faithful action. To believe in the one whom God has sent is not merely to agree that Jesus is the Son of God. It also means that we need to follow Jesus by doing the good work that God intends for us.