

FAITH ALONE

²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. ²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, “Rabbi, when did you get here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered, “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. 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.” ²⁸ Then they asked him, “What must we do to do the works God requires?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.” ³⁰ So they asked him, “What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? ³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴ “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.” 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.

How many ways are there into heaven?

When Jesus fed the Five Thousand, some of the people thought that bread on earth today was better than heaven tomorrow, and that if they just stuck to the basics of the rules that come from Moses, that would be their ticket in.

The people who were with Jesus followed him for the wrong reason-- although we probably could ask, who ever comes to church for the right reason the first time? But listen to some of the things the people said: “**Rabbi, when did you get here?**” They didn’t know that Jesus had walked across the lake while they were sleeping. All they knew was that his disciples had sailed in that direction, and they thought they might get there before Jesus.

Jesus questioned why they were looking for him, because he fed them and they wanted him to feed their bellies again rather than give them food for eternal life. To this they asked, “**What must we do, to do the work God requires?**” This is that dangerous opinion that mankind has, the notion that people are basically good, or at least that I myself am basically good, and that this basic goodness in me, at least in part, earns God’s favor, and so I deserve to go to heaven. But as Paul says in our first lesson, to the Ephesians, “**your old self is corrupted**” by sin, not worthy of God’s favor, but worthy of eternal damnation. This is the old self we inherit and pass along to our children.

In fact, the human intellect of every one of us, the will, the emotions, our intentions, are so thoroughly corrupted by the fall into sin that we and any of our abilities or intentions are not capable of any good of any kind in the eyes of God. Romans 5 teaches, **“We were God’s enemies.”**

When Jesus responded to the people there by the lake, he put it simply: What do you need to do? Nothing. **“Believe in me, the one that God has sent.”** But for those people, as for so many people, this was too simple! And so as if Jesus needed to prove what he had just said, they ask for another miracle. **“What sign will you give that we may believe you?”**

Throughout Jesus’ ministry, the Feeding of the Five Thousand is usually, even universally, accepted to be the most spectacular and famous of his miracle. Apart from his resurrection, it’s the only miracle recorded in all four of the Gospels. And Jesus will refer to it later as the sign to counter doubt when his own disciples have struggles with their faith. But here is the very crowd he had fed, or part of it, the very next day, telling him that that wasn’t enough. “You’ll have to do better than that, Jesus,” they were saying. And this is when they brought up Moses.

“A better sign, they say, would be what Moses did, giving the people (us) daily bread, manna, falling from the sky day after day.”

That’s the kind of sign that they think would have put God’s stamp of approval on Jesus’ preaching. Or put another way: They might have accepted Jesus and his miracles, like the Feeding of the Five Thousand, as evidence that he is the Son of God, but they didn’t want the Son of God. They wanted to be righteous by themselves. To have a Son of God that they should trust and believe in? That was of no value to them.

But to get goodies, to get manna out of the sky, and bread every day for free; now that was a miracle they could sink their teeth into. And more than that, How blessed they would be if they could claim that it was all their idea. The wonder worker? He didn’t know what to do with his special gift, but we knew, and we told him. His miracle of manna that they were demanding, that was also a miracle that they would even take credit for, since their Savior was unimaginative and kind of a big oaf who needed their guidance.

They remind me of the Jews in Jeremiah’s time who didn’t want to be bothered with things like faith, or repentance, or being sorry for sins or believing in God for forgiveness. They pointed to what they thought was the answer to everything: “The temple of the Lord!” They chanted over and over again (this is Jeremiah 7:4). “The temple, the temple, we’ve got the magic temple!” What did God do with their temple? He let the Babylonians plunder it, pull it down, pulverize the stone into gravel, and burn everything that was left to ashes.

That's what the Law of God does to all of our opinions that veer away from faith in Christ alone. I don't really care to explain what all the different paths to heaven different people in the world try to imagine. For one thing, we tend to remember only a certain percent of what we hear. If I spend time telling you what other people do, well, that's maybe how some people get mixed up about the truth.

So not only should we recognize that God pulverizes our human errors about other paths to heaven, but we should pray that he does this, crushing whatever might be in my heart apart from Jesus. Because since we're saved through faith in Jesus alone, don't I want to sweep out the crumbs and cobwebs and rubble of any other opinion?

One last point to be made here. The bread Jesus speaks about here is not the bread of the Lord's Supper. While they can be compared, this account of Jesus Feeding the Five Thousand takes place a year earlier.

The Bread of Life is Jesus Christ himself, given by God for us to believe and who removed our sins forever.

You might be struggling with a temptation you can't overcome, and you feel ashamed by it. Jesus died to atone for that sin. Put your trust in him, and ask his help to overcome that temptation.

You might be struggling with something that isn't a sin at all, but a challenge in your life, maybe a hard diagnosis, or the consequences of something from long ago, or just uncertainty. There is Jesus. Put your faith in Jesus, and ask him to help you get through this.

There might be someone listening-- maybe not you, but maybe somebody you know-- who's never heard the idea of faith in Jesus alone before. This isn't something to be embarrassed about, and if you know someone for whom this is true, don't act they're an idiot for not knowing, but be reassuring. That's right! We're saved by trusting in Jesus, and nothing else. Jesus did everything for us, and he did it in our place.

The people at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, at least some of them, didn't get that even when the Lord fed them by a miracle with his own hands. Be patient when someone doesn't get it today. Patient, but firm, and encouraging. That's right: We're saved by Jesus alone, by the grace of God. And the peace of God, etc. Amen.