

Check the Expiration Date

John 6:24-35

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Most people have their own peculiarities, often driven by some mild phobia or fear of something. Sometimes people will check the front door three or four times, just to make sure the door is securely locked. Sometimes people will go back and check the iron several times, just to make sure they turned it off. Some people would classify themselves as obsessive hand-washers, which really isn't a bad thing, considering the ease of transmission of so many diseases these days. I admit that I have been guilty of all these compulsions at some time or another. They are all driven by some kind of fear--whether it be a fear of forgetting something, or a fear of getting sick, or something like that.

I have another phobia as well: I won't eat anything past its expiration date. I know in my mind that most expiration dates are put there out of some regulatory obligation, and I also know in my mind that most foods are still good for some time beyond the expiration date. But I won't test that theory, at least not on myself. I don't want to get sick. So I play it safe, and I refuse to eat something after its expiration date.

But because of that, I end up throwing away a lot of food that is probably still good. My refusal to go beyond the expiration date leads me to waste a good bit of food. It also reinforces the notion that much of what I consume is perishable, that it doesn't last forever, that there comes a day when it is no longer of benefit to me.

Isn't that the case with much of our lives—that the things we consume, the things we store up for ourselves, the things we seek in life, often end up perishing, and then what good are they to us?

When a crowd of people came up to Jesus, seeking yet another miraculous feeding of loaves and fishes, Jesus tells them, "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but which endures to eternal life."¹

"Do not labor for the food which perishes," Jesus tells us. Look at the expiration date. Notice that much of what you seek in your life is perishable, transitory, and there will come a day when it won't be there for you anymore. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but which endures to eternal life. Pursue that for which there is no expiration date.

It is, before anything else, a call to examine what is important in our lives, and a call to ask ourselves what it is that motivates us to come to Jesus in the first place.

Do not labor for the food which perishes.

Is Jesus talking to you?

What is it that really matters to you? We live in a consumer-driven culture, where we are bombarded by the message that whoever has the most things, the biggest houses, the most fancy automobiles, the biggest stock portfolio—whoever has the most things, wins. And so people invest all of their lives seeking more, more, more. It is an insatiable appetite. People think that if only they get just a little more than what they already have, then life will be meaningful. And then they get what they wanted, only to find out that they are still empty inside, void of meaning.

The past year has been painful for many. This time last year, most people were doing fairly well. Sure, the housing market was in a bit of a slump, but everyone knew that it was just a temporary speed bump, and that it would recover. And then in the span of just a few days in early October, the bottom fell out of the stock market, and our whole economy went into a tailspin. The financial markets were in shambles. Bernie Madoff was revealed as the fraud that he is. The auto industry was going belly-up.

How quickly we found out that the foundations on which our world was building its security were disappearing beneath our feet. It turns out that all these things we thought would fill us with security and give us meaning and happiness had an expiration date, and that date was sometime last fall.

Don't labor for the food which perishes, says Jesus.

¹John 6:27, RSV

But it's not just the pursuits of the world that Jesus is critiquing here. He's also reminding us to examine what it is that drives us toward him. Why do we seek Jesus in the first place? The crowd of people who were following him wanted more bread. They wanted Jesus to give them what they wanted, regardless of whether or not it was what they really needed. And what they wanted was something that would only end up leaving them hungry the next day. They weren't interested in Jesus as the One who could fill their spiritual hunger; they only wanted Jesus to fill their physical hunger.

In nineteenth-century China, there was a name for persons who came to the church because they were hungry for material food: they were called the "rice Christians". They came to the church and joined the church, and they were active as long as their physical needs were being met by the generosity of their fellow Christians. But once these people were able to rise above the poverty that had made them hungry and they no longer needed the assistance of the church to put food on their tables, they drifted away from the church. They became known as "rice Christians."²

Are we "rice Christians" in the American church? As I watch some of the televangelists on TV, and I see the crowds that fill indoor arenas—crowds seeking health, wealth, and happiness—I wonder what will happen when they decide that they no longer need Jesus because they got what they needed personally. I wonder also what will happen when reality falls short of their expectations.

What motivates us to come to Jesus? Is it because we expect that, as the now-famous "Prayer of Jabez" promises, that we will find material abundance simply because we are bold enough to ask God to "enlarge our territory"? Is it because we hope that Jesus will miraculously make our financial woes go away?

Don't be a "rice Christian." Don't come to Jesus for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.

This is not to say that Jesus doesn't care about our material well-being, because clearly Jesus does care. Just before he tells the people not to labor for the food that perishes, he has fed them with the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They were hungry, and Jesus fed them. But that's not the only reason why Jesus wants us to come to him. He wants to satisfy our hunger, but the real hunger he wants to satisfy is the hunger we have for a relationship with God.

Through a series of questions and answers during which the crowd never quite gets it, but Jesus continues to steer the people toward what he wants them to know, and we end up at his climactic self-revelation. In verse 33, Jesus tells the people of a bread from heaven which gives life to the world. The people respond by saying, "Lord, give us this bread always."³

In so doing, the people recognize that Jesus does have something to give that is more fulfilling than a mixture of flour, yeast, and water. And Jesus answers them with the first of his "I am" statements in the gospel of John: "I am the bread of life", says Jesus. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."⁴

Don't labor for the food that perishes, says Jesus. Come to me, and find something that won't perish. Come to me, and find something that endures to eternal life. Jesus doesn't offer us a guarantee of health and wealth and happiness, but he does offer himself. Jesus doesn't guarantee that we will get everything we want, but he does promise to provide what we need.

We pray, "Give us this day our daily bread..." and Jesus gives it to us, even as God provided the manna in the wilderness. "Come to me," says Jesus, "and I will provide what you need. I will reconcile you to God. I will meet you with compassion and mercy, I will endow you with dignity and meaning. I will give you my peace that passes understanding. I will surround you with love and acceptance. This is the bread that endures to eternal life. Eat of this bread, and you will be satisfied. Come to me, and you will never hunger; believe in me, and you will never thirst."

²Ben Sparks, in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year B, Vol. 3, edited by David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 308.

³John 6:34

⁴John 6:35

Twice in this morning's text Jesus invites us to believe in him. Believing is more than just an intellectual exercise. Believing is more than just a deep longing within our hearts. Believing does engage our mind, and it does engage our hearts, but it's not true belief until we commit with our wills.

You see, Jesus offers himself as the Bread of Life. But the only way we can truly receive the Bread of Life is to give ourselves to him in return. This is what it means to believe in Jesus. Believing means living a new life, a life defined by Jesus Christ. William Barclay describes it this way:

“The essence of the Christian life is a new relationship to God, a relationship offered by him and made possible [by Jesus], a relationship which issues in that service, purity and trust which are the reflection of God. This is the work which God wishes us and enables us to perform.”⁵

Believing is a way of life. It is a total investment of who we are, in the One who can transform our lives and give us new life. Belief is a giving-over of ourselves into the hands of Jesus, that we may be conformed to his will.

What are you looking for in your life? What is it that motivates you to come to Jesus?

Don't come to Jesus for the things that perish. If you do, one day you'll wake up only to discover that the things in which you have put your hope have evaporated.

Instead, come to Jesus for the things that really count. Come to Jesus for the eternal life that he can give to you.

Don't labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life. Amen.

⁵William Barclay, *The Gospel of John, vol. 1*, The Daily Study Bible Series, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 214.