

Assistant Jesus?



Gary Wilkerson September 21, 2015

John 6 contains one of the hardest passages for me in all of Scripture. It's a difficult text for pastors especially because it speaks of followers who end up rejecting Christ and turning away. The passage I'm referring to isn't a teaching or prophecy. It's a scene in which people literally left Jesus in droves.

He had just miraculously fed a crowd of thousands. The people were amazed and thrilled by what he'd done, ready to follow this wonder-working Messiah. But when Jesus challenged them about what they were really after, they scoffed and left by the masses.

Underlying this passage is a question for anyone who would follow Christ. The question is this: "Who is in charge of your life, you or Jesus?" Do we allow God to have total direction of our lives? Or do we try to determine for ourselves what God wants of us?

Every Christian faces this question early on in his or her walk with the Lord. From the outset a battle takes place in us, a clash of two warring cultures. First there is the outer culture of the world, which constantly urges, "How can you benefit from this?" Then there is the culture of God's kingdom, which asks, "How can you serve the Lord and your neighbor?"

Jesus had already preached that the kingdom of God is at work in the world: "The kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15, NLT). In other words: "The kingdom of God is present among you." Most of Christ's listeners that day had the world's mindset. They were driven mainly by what they could gain for themselves. When Jesus came along offering blessings, they flocked to him saying, "Sure, if you're going to provide me with everything, I'll follow you. If you'll heal my sick family members and answer my prayers, yes, absolutely, I'll be your disciple."

But what happens to our faith commitment if these things don't come to pass for us? How committed to Jesus are we when we realize he's not just our "assistant" in life? The same people in this scene who were quick to follow Christ were just as quick to reject him. Disappointed, they left, giving up on him.

Jesus knew this would happen. That's why on the heels of performing a great miracle for those multitudes, he confronted them: "I tell you the truth, you want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs" (John 6:26). Is the same true of us today? Do we follow Jesus mainly because of his blessings or because he is Lord?

A few years ago a phrase was coined in our culture: "The Greatest Generation."

This awesome tag was earned by the World War II generation in America, people who served sacrificially overseas and at home. These folks told themselves, "We can win this war. It's going to be hard and will take great sacrifices. But it can be done and we're the ones to do it."

Once the war ended, that generation held on to the values that had helped them win—and a great trajectory began in our country. Suddenly there were incredible advances in technology and science, resulting in space travel, moon landings, medical advancements and an economic boom. These were the prosperous fruits of a culture built on values held dear by The Greatest Generation. These people had become used to sacrificing for the war effort, so it was no great effort for, say, a couple to save money over several years to make a down payment on a house.

But if a culture is based on weak values, it will fall apart. Nazi Germany was built on a culture of dominance, supremacy and fear. Under Hitler, that country was able to build a powerful war machine in a short time, threatening all of Europe and other continents. But in a few short years Germany withered until it collapsed in war-torn rubble.

America has also seen a culture-based collapse in recent years. It happened in the business world. I have a friend who worked for a famous investment firm in the eighties and nineties. This was one of America's oldest, most reputable companies, built on decades of serving the long-term economic well-being of American families. But my friend saw the company's culture change as greed and a mentality of "have it all now" infected Wall Street. In 2008, when the housing bubble burst, that company had to lay off thousands of workers—and it did so coldly without caring about them. The company eventually came under government investigation.

The church also has a highly valued culture to preserve.

Every generation of Christians has to check itself to discern whether its mission and actions are God-honoring. We continually have to ask ourselves, "Are we still serving the Lord and our neighbor faithfully and sacrificially? Or have we drifted into a 'bless me' mentality?" Christ knew exactly where the masses' hearts were when they began following him. That's why he challenged them, "You want to be with me because I fed you, not because you understood the miraculous signs" (John 6:26). Why does Jesus refer to "miraculous signs" here? Think about what a sign does. It points to something; it isn't the thing itself. When a road sign reads, "Denver 60 Miles," we know we're not in Denver yet but we're on the way. In the same way, Jesus was letting them know the loaves and the fishes weren't the point. They revealed the loving care of the heavenly Father. The miracles are signs of his care for us.

The crowd's response revealed their hearts. "They answered...the Scriptures say, 'Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat'" (6:30-31). They were playing Moses' example against Jesus. It was arm-twisting, like a child who goes to each parent trying to get what he wants. Do we look for God in our midst? Or do we merely seek his provision? Let's be honest, often when we pray we want an answer now, today, this hour. That's an unfortunate trait of our world's "have it all now" culture. In a spiritual sense, we lack a tremendous value that The Greatest Generation held dear: to know that by faith we'll eventually see great blessings.

For the Christian, knowing God isn't about being "blessed now." The Lord won't bend to our lusts to give us everything we want, when we want it. His desire is to have a relationship with us—an ongoing, long-term relationship that bears lasting fruit. So his blessings aren't the end-all of the relationship; they're signs of his faithfulness and compassion—traits that any of us would covet in a relationship. Christ's miracles were evidence of those beautiful traits.

But for the crowds in Jesus' day, a relationship wasn't enough. "They replied, 'We want to perform God's works, too. What should we do?'" (6:28). This may sound like a godly ambition, but behind it was a desire for autonomy. They weren't seeking God's power to serve the poor, disabled and hungry. They were thinking of themselves. This is proven a few verses later when they demanded of Jesus, "Give us that bread every day" (6:34). Jesus was communicating to them very clearly, "God isn't anyone's personal vending machine."

What was at the root of this "me first" mentality? I believe it was a question that many Christians today wonder as well: "Is God really good?"

Do you believe God is as good in the hard times as he is at other times?

These people didn't believe that about God. Multitudes turned away from Jesus at that very moment. "At this point many of his disciples turned away and deserted him" (John 6:66).

I preach God's goodness, faithfulness and desire to bless us. And I rejoice whenever someone calls our office to say, "Praise God, I can pay my rent this month!" Yet God doesn't stop being good when that same person has to rent a U-Haul truck the next month because they can no longer afford their apartment. God never stops being good, no matter what.

That's why, in our most trying moments, we may hear his voice whisper, "I see your need and your anguish. Do you trust me? Or are you angry at me? Do you love me? And do you know I love you?" Sometimes when he withholds a blessing, he is asking us something important: "Do you follow me because of what you get from me, or because you love me and know that I love you?" Often God wants to show us what is in our hearts so we may

grow in this cherished relationship.

Our trials also reveal which culture rules our hearts. Jesus' challenge to the people here showed they were mired in a culture of complaint. He actually told them, in verse 43, "Stop complaining about what I said." A culture of complaint always sours relationships. That's why he asked his closest circle of disciples, "Does this offend you? Then what will you think if you see the Son of Man ascend to heaven again?" (6:61-62). He was saying, "You're fighting over bread and fish. How will you not complain even more when I leave you bodily?" Jesus has a question for every hurting believer today.

As the crowds began leaving, Christ turned to the twelve and asked, "Are you also going to leave?" (John 6:67). This is a question for every hurting Christian today—everyone whose prayer hasn't been answered the way they've wanted; whose marriage is on the brink; whose physical healing hasn't come; who is in the battle of their life—in other words, everyone who is disappointed with God. In those times, we are all tempted to give up praying and turn away.

The passage in John 6 contains Jesus' response to us. When he speaks of "ascend(ing) to heaven again" (6:62), he's telling us, "I am going to glory on your behalf. All the angels in creation are going to bow down before me and cry out day and night, 'Holy, holy, holy.' Knowing this, do not get caught up in loaves and fishes. The Father, who rules over all of creation, sees every one of your needs. He holds your future in his hands."

Peter seemed to grasp this great truth. He replied, "Lord, to whom [else] would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God" (6:68-69). What a moment for the disciples—and for us today. Our faith commitment isn't based on what God gives us. It's based on our relationship with him, and who we know him to be: compassionate, merciful and faithful.

Best of all, this relationship doesn't hinge on our performance but on his faithfulness. He has called us to serve him, and therefore he will be faithful to keep us. Friend, hold on to your faith. Your heavenly Father never slumbers; he is continually at work on your behalf, even when you cannot see the end of your trial. You can rest assured he does. Amen!

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