

Do Not Labor for the Food Which Perishes

by John Piper

John Piper emphasizes the importance of prioritizing spiritual nourishment over material gains in our work and lives.

Scripture: Matthew 6:19, Matthew 6:33, Luke 8:18, John 4:32, John 6:27, 1 Corinthians 7:30

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Spiritual Nourishment"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of not laboring for material possessions that perish, but instead focusing on laboring for the eternal food that Jesus provides. He emphasizes the need for submission to Jesus as Lord and the willingness to obey His surprising commands, highlighting the difference between a fleshly attitude of resistance and a Spirit-filled attitude of humble submission. Piper explains that seeking Jesus and believing in His power is not enough; true spiritual nourishment comes from feasting on Christ and finding satisfaction in His eternal promises.

Transcript

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John 6:27

Labor Day has been a national holiday in America for 87 years. The purpose is to honor the working people of our land. In 1956 a commemorative Labor Day stamp was issued with a picture of a strong man holding a sledge hammer, a pick, a hoe, and an ax over his shoulder. His wife was seated by his side with a book in her lap showing a small child how to read. In the lower left hand corner was a large block with words of Carlyle carved into it: "Labor is Life." The meaning was clear and I think it is true: without industrious labor there will be no life--no means to feed, clothe, house, and educate a family or oneself.

But it is an amazing and disconcerting thing how a true statement (like "Labor is Life") can mislead us and devastate generations when it is isolated from other truths. If you look at your life solely in terms of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, machines, books, and toys, then the statement, "Labor is Life," will mean that you should work mainly with a view to providing those things. But in spite of the fact that it seems so natural to work for such things Jesus said to the Jews in John 6:27, "Do not labor for the food which perishes." And of course Jesus didn't mean it is just food that's ruled out, but clothes and homes and cars are okay. Anything that perishes, anything that wears out, anything of no eternal worth--all that is implied in "food that perishes." And we are not to labor for food. Do not labor for house. Do not labor for clothes,

car, appliances, books, sporting gear, etc.

Now we are in a precarious place, because you believe in your heart it is legitimate and good to work in order to buy food. Yet you hear Jesus saying, "Do not labor for the food which perishes." I call experiences like this crises of spiritual discovery. You can discover two things in the next few minutes. First, you can discover the measure of your submission to Jesus as Lord. There are two very different attitudes you may be experiencing right now. One is resistance and hardness. You may be saying, "Well, I don't care what it means, I'm going to keep on working just the way I always have." Another is humble, open submission to Jesus. You may be saying, "Well, Lord I never thought from your word that it might be wrong to work for food and clothing. But, Lord, there is nothing I want more than to do what pleases you in the way that pleases you. I know how bent I am to sinning so please help me understand your surprising command and make me willing to obey gladly." There is a quantitative and eternally significant difference between those two attitudes. The first one is not of the Spirit, but of the flesh. The second one is a gift of the Spirit, fragrant with the grace of humility and submissiveness to Jesus. It is not naive, but is thoughtfully and soberly ready to say, "Anything, Jesus, anything, anything in my mind or in my behavior I am willing to change if you say the word."

The other thing you may discover in the next few minutes, if you are open to the voice of Jesus, is a new dimension of obedience in your work. Many of you have already made the discovery and simply enjoy hearing it reaffirmed from Scripture. Others of you may discover for the first time an aspect of Jesus' will for your life which you have neglected. "Therefore take heed how you hear," Jesus said, "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).

I think we should acknowledge from the outset that the point of emphasis in John 6:27 is the positive statement, "Labor for the food which endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give you." Jesus, on the day before, had performed the miracle of feeding the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. When the people seek him out the next day, he accuses them in verse 26 of not coming because they had seen signs but because they ate their fill. In other words, they had no spiritual sensitivity that Jesus' miracle pointed beyond itself 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 the things of the flesh, not the things of the Spirit.

So Jesus said, "Don't work for fleshly food that perishes, work for eternal food." They respond in verse 28 with complete misunderstanding, "What works do you think God requires in order to give us the bread of eternal life?" Jesus answers in verse 29 that all the works you can do for the bread that endures are summed up in one work, which is no work at all: "Believe in him whom God has sent." Come to me, trust me, feed on me. Draw life from me, and you will have the food that endures to eternal life.

Then step-by-step in the rest of the chapter he unfolds the meaning. Verse 35: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Jesus is the bread that endures to 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: "the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh." So here it becomes clear that eating the true bread means nourishing our souls with benefits of Jesus' atoning death. We do not simply come and trust a loving man. We pin all our hopes on the forgiveness that he purchased for us in laying down his life. Verse 53 goes so far as to say we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. This happens when the love that his death shows and the hope that it secures so delights

and satisfies our soul hunger that we continue in his word forever. That spiritual feeding on Christ is what the Lord's Supper symbolizes.

That is the main emphasis in John 6:27. "Labor for the food which endures to eternal life." Labor to feast on Jesus. Satisfy yourself with his beauty and his hope-filled fellowship. But I had a wise teacher once who told me that one of the best ways to find out what an author really thought was to watch for his "not ... but" statements--statements where he says, "this is not the case, but that is," or "I do not believe this, but I do believe that." You always have a clearer idea of what a person affirms if you know what he denies. Wishy-washy politicians and wishy-washy theologians are notorious for making broad affirmations while avoiding specific denials. For example, you simply can't know what J.A.T. Robinson means when he affirms the trustworthiness of the New Testament until you hear all the things he denies. Then you realize that he means something very different by "trustworthy" than you mean by it. Therefore, we will increase our understanding greatly if in all our reading and listening we take heed to the "not...but" statements, the negatives as well as the affirmations.

Now the point of all this is simply to say that we must not ignore the negative half of Jesus' command. Without it we will not have as clear an idea of what our Lord wants from us. Part of what he wants is that we not labor for food that perishes. What does he mean?

I have already argued that the "food that perishes" implies all material things, not just food, and includes anything that has no eternal worth. The meaning is probably similar to Jesus' word in Matthew 6:19, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal." Anything temporal that the heart can treasure, even immaterial things like prestige and power and status - all this is "food that perishes." It will be worthless at death and useless on the judgment day. So Jesus says, "Do not work for it." What does he mean?

Nowhere does Jesus show contempt for work. He said of his own disciples, as he sent them out, "The laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:7). He intends people to work and to provide for their own and others' needs. St. Paul taught the same thing. "If anyone will not work let him not eat," he says in 2 Thessalonians 3:10. In Ephesians 4:28 he says, "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those who are in need."

Evidently then, Jesus does not mean stop working for a livelihood, but rather, in your work set your eyes on something other than the "food that perishes." Perhaps the best parallel is Matthew 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be yours as well." Don't seek the "food that perishes" God will supply that. You seek the Kingdom, seek the bread that endures to eternity. Don't expend the effort of your mind and your will and your body to try to satisfy yourself with things. Expend your effort instead with a view to finding Christ exalted and satisfying in all you do.

Let me try to apply this to two areas of our life: our religious life and our vocational life. First, our religious life. Notice the connection between verses 26 and 27--"You seek me ... because you ate your fill ... Do not labor for the food which perishes." The people were seeking Jesus. They believed in his miracle-working power; but Jesus called this seeking "laboring for food that perishes" and commanded them not to do it. The lesson for us is this: it is possible to seek Jesus and believe in his power, but be totally lost and worldly-minded. In our situation that means you can be a very religious person and have many right doctrines but not be born again. What is missing is a spiritual feeding on Christ, a heart delight in all that he stands for and a lowly childlike submission to his word. Jesus urges us to examine ourselves to see

whether even in our church life we are laboring for the bread that perishes instead of really feasting spiritually on the Lord we love.

The second application is to our vocational life. How do you get up in the morning and go to work not for the bread that perishes? This is really a spiritual discovery attained through much prayer and longing; my words of explanation won't make it happen. But maybe the Holy Spirit will use the words to fire up your quest. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 7:30,31 that since we live in a time of great urgency, "those who buy should buy as though they had no goods and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it." I think this is another way of saying, yes labor, but do not labor for the bread that perishes. Go ahead and purchase, but act as though you have no goods. Do your business dealings, but stay free from them.

Suppose you are a Christian stockbroker and have watched the market tumble these past weeks. What it means to you not to labor for the food which perishes is that your true life is not jeopardized, your peace and joy are not destroyed. You were not working for the bread that perishes. Your goal is to enjoy Christ being exalted in the way you work. Jesus said in John 4:32,34, "I have food to eat that you do not know... My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work." None of us in our vocations should aim at the food which perishes--leave that to the Lord. We should aim instead to do the will of him who sent us. That too is a kind of feeding on Christ. The Christian stockbroker will say in the face of a falling market: "The main food I want from this job is still there. I am hungry above all to pass this test of faith and have a deep restfulness in the goodness and power of Christ. And I am hungry to enjoy his name being esteemed as others see my demeanor and my integrity and give Christ glory." And to that end he labors for the food which endures to eternal life. He labors, rising early for prayer and meditation, and holding Christ near to his heart all day.

Jesus calls us to be aliens and exiles in the world. Not by taking us out of the world, but by changing at the root how we view the world and do our work in it. I'm sure I have barely skimmed the significance of Jesus' word to us in John 6:27. So I urge you to meditate for yourself on this command: "Do not labor for the food which perishes."

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