

Laetare
John 6:1-15

Agur, the son of Jakeh, says in Proverbs 30:

“Give me neither poverty nor riches,
But give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown You
And say, ‘Who is the LORD?’
Or I may become poor and steal,
And so dishonor the name of my God.” (Proverbs 30:7-9)

Agur asks the Lord to bless him, but not too much. He is a wise man. He knows that the old sinful man that is lurking in him is waiting to seize any opportunity to sin. He knows that he needs his daily bread. He knows that if he doesn't get enough as in times of famine, he'll be tempted to dishonor God's name by sinning. He knows that if he gets too much, he'll be tempted to forget God, an even worse sin. What Agur is really asking for is contentment. Even a pagan like Aesop could understand the danger of not being content. You may remember his fable, “The Dog and his Shadow.”

A Dog was crossing a bridge over a lake with a piece of flesh in his mouth, and saw his own shadow in the water and took it for that of another dog. In the silhouette, the piece of meat in its mouth seemed to be double his own in size. He immediately let go of his own piece, and fiercely attacked the fictitious dog to get the larger piece from him. But in the process, he lost two things: That which he grasped for in the water, because it was a shadow, and his own portion, because the stream swept it away.

The dog loses what he already has because he desires something bigger. He's not content with the steak he already has. When he thinks he sees something bigger he tries to get it too and loses out on both the real steak and the imaginary steak. Even a pagan understands the sin of envy and discontentment.

Yet Aesop and hence, the dog, don't understand we get our daily bread from God. We pray before a meal to remind and teach ourselves that all daily bread comes from our Father in heaven. Prayer does nothing for the food. God has already declared it clean. Prayer is supposed to teach you that all things come from God and that you should be thankful for whatever God provides whether it's dogs and beans or filet mignon. Just as Jesus provided daily bread for the 5,000, He provides daily bread for you. Sometimes it's as simple as bread and fish and sometimes it's as extravagant as a meal fit for a king. We are tempted to complain when it's simple and be gluttonous when it's extravagant. Let us pray the plea of Agur, "Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread." This is also the prayer of Paul in Philippians, "I can do all things through [Christ] who gives me strength." (4;13) Paul is content whether he is in need or has plenty.

And daily bread is so much more than stuff we eat. As the Small Catechism says, "Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body." It includes spouse, child or children, neighbors and the like. It also includes house, natural abilities, and the time you're born into. So many become discontent with the spouse God gives them. So many become discontent with the natural looks or abilities they have or don't have. So many become discontent with the time they're in.

One of the biggest ways we do this is to compare ourselves with other people and their situations. The ninth and tenth commandments cover this well. We aren't to covet our neighbor's house, wife, workers, or situation. In fact, with the fifth through eighth commandments we are commanded to watch out for our neighbor's interests. I believe it's safe to say we should be happy with our neighbor's success and protect our neighbor from suffering any setbacks.

Sadly, though, far too often, we begrudge our neighbor his or her success, abilities, or looks. Many times, this shows up as discontentment with our own situation. Laying aside the habits we may have engaged in that lead to our situation, many of us are dissatisfied with our looks, or abilities, or station in life. Instead of being thankful for what God has given us, we resort to self-pity or escape or distraction as our god instead of the One we should fear, love, and trust above all else.

So, “Why is the physical so important?”

First, God made us as physical creatures with a soul or spirit. The physical and spiritual seem to be equally important. God could have made us just spiritual creatures like the angels, but He didn't. God could have made us just physical creatures like the other animals, but He didn't. He made us both physical and spiritual. We were meant to enjoy God and His Creation. When our Lord Jesus comes back, He will restore our soul and bodies together. Death from our sin, separates the physical and spiritual for a short time, but God will restore us fully as body and spirit when He restores all things.

Second, the physical and spiritual are so entwined that you can usually tell there's a problem with the spiritual in the physical. Look at someone who self-harms. They've been deeply hurt in the spiritual realm and it comes out as self-harm. Look at someone with anorexia or bulimia. Their spiritual hurt comes out in a physical manifestation. I'm still meditating on the connection between the physical and spiritual. Our bodies will fail because of sin. As we age, we collect scars and pains. We lose energy. We get sick with a kind of sickness that leads to death. And in the Christian, this is usually a time of spiritual renewal and strength. Even though the body is wasting away, the spiritual recognizes the birth pangs of going through death into life. Even with this exception, I believe there's some fertile meditation to be had on how taking care of ourselves physically can be good for the soul as well.

Third, and finally, God promises to care for us body and soul. In any kind of spirituality outside of Christianity, there seems to be a rejection of the physical. However it manifests, it usually traces back to some form of gnosticism. In gnosticism, the only real thing is the spiritual. This is a rejection of God's design and creation. God created us body and soul, cares for us in both body and soul, and redeems us in both body and soul.

And He will restore us in our glorified body and souls. It's no small thing that the salvation of God comes through physical means of water, bread, and wine.

The feeding of the 5,000 is in all four Gospels. It's important!

We see clearest of all in John that the feeding of the 5,000 is meant to point to the miracle of the bread of heaven coming down to save the world. Later in John 6, Jesus says that He is the bread come down for the life of the world, and that life is bought through His flesh. (John 6:33, 48, 50-51, 58) Jesus means that He is the bread of heaven in two senses.

First, He Himself is the bread of heaven who gives His life for the world. (John 6:51) Jesus clearly identifies Himself as the bread from heaven allegorically. Jesus isn't literally bread. He is fully God and fully Man. He has flesh just like you or I but without sin. I don't believe any of us would call ourselves bread allegorically or literally. But Jesus calls Himself bread because just as the bread from heaven, mana, fell and saved the people of Israel in the wilderness, Jesus comes down from heaven and saves all people in the world by His perfect, atoning sacrifice.

Second, He offers Himself bodily in bread and wine. Many Christians take John 6 to mean that Jesus is allegorical in the Supper as well. But I don't know how you allegorize Jesus' words, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." (John 6:53-54) Yes, Jesus refers to Himself allegorically as the "Bread of Heaven" but He then literally offers His very flesh and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine for our salvation.

Jesus takes care of us physically so that we also depend on Him to take care of us eternally. The sin of the crowd of 5,000 is that they only wanted Jesus to take care of them physically in the here and now. They didn't see or understand that Jesus is the Lord of life who takes care of us in the here and now and in the ever after. Jesus feeds us the bread of life, His body, so that we continue to remain in Him and not be lost to Him eternally. The crowd was fed for a day, yet they deserted Jesus and most were most likely not fed eternally. Wonder of wonders, you and I get to feast on the eternal bread that saves us eternally.

That doesn't mean that God won't test you like He tested Philip or Paul. You will go through times of famine and times of plenty. God will allow you to suffer times of want to see whether you will cling to Him alone.

When things get tough, will you abandon God like the crowd did? Those who treat Jesus as a bread king will fall away when things get tough. God will allow you to suffer times of plenty to see whether you will cling to Him alone. When things go well will you try to make Jesus a bread king like the prosperity folks do? Or will you forget Jesus altogether? It's easy to remember Jesus when we suffer lack or illness or devastation. God sends us these things at time to keep us dependent on Him. It's not so easy to remember Jesus when there is plenty and things are going well or, at least, how we think they should be going.

So we pray the prayer of Agur, "God don't give me too much daily bread, but just enough." And when God tests us through lack or plenty, we remember Paul. The secret to facing lack or plenty is to remain in Christ and His gifts.

That's one of the beautiful things about our doctrine. We understand that we cannot generate our own faith, but that it must come to us from the outside. The preaching of God's Word, the Sacraments of Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper continue to deliver to us saving faith. If we rely on our own efforts, we will fail to remain strong in the faith. If we rely on God's means, we will stay strong in the faith, whether it feels strong or weak to us from the inside. The object of our faith, Jesus, remains as strong as He ever was. He fed the 5,000 bread and fish for the sustenance of their physical bodies. He feeds you today bread and wine, or in His words, Flesh and Blood, for the sustenance of your eternal bodies. There is no greater daily bread on earth.

In Jesus' name. Amen.