

Book: The Gospels
Series: *Following Jesus*
Lesson: *The Significance of the Signs*
Text: John 6:1-15
Date: Sunday, December 23, 2012

Colonial Hills
ABF
Baptist Church

Key



= Teacher Information



= Discussion Starter

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TEACHING TIP

While some encouraging and helpful thoughts will hopefully be gleaned throughout the first two points, the moral of the story is discovered in the third point.

NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Combined ABF

INTRODUCTION

Illustration: When we took Driver's Education, we all learned that the different shapes and colors of road signs each had a unique meaning and significance. So, we were taught to interpret the brown road signs as indicating recreational or cultural interest information; blue and green signs as providing traveler services or route information; orange signs as warning of construction; etc.

Do you remember what the following signs indicate?



Answers: "stop"; "yield"; "warning" indicator; "do not enter"; "US route" marker; "US interstate" marker

Throughout the gospels, those who followed Jesus were regularly shown signs that indicated something significant about Jesus. We call these signs "miracles" and discover that Jesus performed at least forty. Seven of them are recorded in the gospel of John, and one of them is our consideration this morning.

Ignoring or misinterpreting a road sign is certainly a problem, but thankfully it doesn't always bring consequences. On the contrary,

missing the significance of these signs from Jesus can have enormously far-reaching implications. So, this morning, we're going to seek to interpret the sign of John 6:1-15¹. Rather than stating the interpretation in a thesis statement now, we're going to allow the unfolding of the story itself to lead us to a conclusion.

SCENE 1: THE SETTING (vv. 1-10)

In John 6, we witness a large crowd following Jesus around the Sea of Galilee, because they are intrigued by the miracles that He has been working. This dynamic creates an ideal setting, ordained by Jesus (v. 6), for Him to perform another sign.

1. *The overwhelming need (vv. 1-5, 10)*

The passage twice depicts a “great” (vv. 2, 5) crowd following Jesus (cf. “so many,” v. 9). Not wanting to leave its size up to one’s imagination, John provides a number in verse 10. He says that the men numbered 5,000. The cross reference in Matthew 14:21 clarifies that this number does indeed refer only to the adult males. Including a reasonable number of women and children, conservative estimates put this crowd between 15,000 and 20,000.

Additionally, Matthew records that the location of this miracle was in a desolate place and its timing was late in the day (Matthew 14:15), because Jesus had spent the day compassionately ministering to this multitude (Matthew 14:14; Mark 6:34; Luke 9:11). Now, with dusk approaching, these people have nothing to eat (Mark 6:36), and Jesus is telling the twelve that they need to provide for the thousands (Matthew 14:16; Luke 9:13).

Our passage reveals, however, that it is not only the physical needs that are overwhelming. There were also deep spiritual needs revealed in this setting. The crowd betrays a superficial motive for following Jesus according

to verse 2 and reiterated in verse 26—“The crowd was not motivated by faith, repentance, or genuine love for Him. On the contrary, they followed the Lord because they saw the signs which He was performing on those who were sick.”² Even His twelve closest followers are going to demonstrate a characteristic “little faith”—they were grasping who Jesus was (Matthew 14:33; Luke 9:20), but struggling to understand what that meant.

2. *The underwhelming resources (vv. 6-9)*

To make matters seemingly worse for these spectators, an overwhelming need was met with underwhelming resources. Now, in reality, the resources were inexhaustible because the Lord of Creation was in their midst. Thus, Jesus’ inquiry to Philip (i.e., “Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” v. 6) is not because He Himself is staggering at the magnitude of the problem, but because He wants to test and strengthen His twelve disciples, in particular (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7).

Philip’s response reveals a lack of faith that sees only the enormity of the need (v. 7). Philip is “Mr. Math” and quickly analyzes the situation to determine the probability that a solution can be found. His calculations conclude that even 200 denarii (or roughly eight months’ wages, as one denarii was equivalent to a day’s wage) would not be enough to even give a small appetizer to everyone. “Rather than focusing on Jesus, Philip’s mental computer began to work like a cash register, and all he could think about was the total cash that would be needed to provide just a little bread for each person.”³

John also records the response of another disciple. Andrew is “Mr. Optimistic” among the group (vv. 8-9). He does a little better than Philip by actually trying to find a solution. He finds a small boy with a meager lunch.⁴ This was probably a result of Jesus’ command in Mark 6:38 to

find out how much food the crowd had. And, in light of a pretty poor find, even Andrew skeptically adds, “What are they among so many?” (v. 9).



Application: What do we learn about the character and ministry of Jesus in this setting? *Jesus is omniscient and always has a plan (vv. 6); Jesus always “looked out for the needs of others” (v. 5; cf. Phil. 2:1-8), putting His feelings/circumstances behind the needs/situations of others (v. 3; Matthew 14:13-14; Mark 6:31-32); Jesus was patient with unbelievers, even with those who “should” be further along (v. 5ff; Matthew 14:16; cf. II Timothy 2:13); etc.*

Which disciple are you more prone to exemplify—conniving, analyzing, calculating, controlling Philip or positive, optimistic, “its-all-going-to-be-okay,” “let’s-just-not-worry-about-it” Andrew? *open discussion*

In what ways might either of those personalities prove to have “little faith”? *“Philips” tend to take matters into their own hands, to plan apart from prayer, to manipulate instead of meditate, to trust their own skills over God’s sovereignty; “Andrews” may live in some level of denial, not wanting to recognize the gravity of a situation, and therefore not trusting God to intervene—when their optimism runs out, it reveals an empty faith; etc.*

Transition: In verse 10, Jesus begins to “take matters into His own hands,” so to speak, and the result is another miraculous sign.

SCENE 2: THE SIGN (vv. 10-13)

Jesus takes control of the situation, and according to parallel passages, He does so very orderly (Mark 6:39-40; Luke 9:14-15). Then, He accepts the boy’s meager meal, gives thanks for the food,⁵ and instructs His disciples to distribute the loaves and fish to the crowd. The result? Jesus takes the five loaves and the two fish, and from that meager meal provides an all-you-can-eat feast (vv. 11-12).

According to verses 12-13, when the disciples gathered the leftovers together, there were twelve baskets full. While a simple principle of conservation may appropriately be gleaned here, the detail of twelve baskets is probably a purposeful orchestration by Christ to unmistakably emphasize His sufficiency to the twelve disciples. Since each disciple would theoretically have his own basket of leftovers, this detail seems to be an exclamation point in the face of their unbelief.



Application: What are some generic principles about Christ’s provision that we should glean from this passage? *(1) We should give thanks for God’s physical provision, especially our sustenance (v. 11). (2) We shouldn’t complain about the quality of the provision (v. 11—still barley loaves and fish, but a lavish provision none-the-less). (3) We should not waste God’s provision (v. 12).*

What do we learn from this miracle about how Jesus works? *(1) His working is timely, for our good, and sometimes unobservable—“The Lord did not create a vast amount of food all at once, but continually ‘broke the loaves and...kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and...divided up the two fish among them all’ (Mark 6:41). The astonished crowd seated on the grassy hillside that evening witnessed the Creator God at work.”⁶ (2) His supernatural work is often through natural means—“Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that the Lord distributed the food to the crowd through the disciples. Jesus, of course, did not need to use them; He could just as easily have distributed the food to the crowd by supernatural means. God, however, often works through weak, fallible humans” (Numbers 12:3; Judges 6:15; 1 Corinthians 1:27).⁷ (3) His work is sufficient—“The Lord does nothing by half measures. Instead of the little taste of which Philip dubiously spoke (v. 7), everyone ate as much as they wanted, so that they were filled.”⁸*

Transition: The needy setting of John 6 has been climaxed by the powerful sign of Jesus Christ. But this colorful story now ends in lifeless hues of gray and black.

SCENE 3: THE SEPARATION (vv. 14-15)

According to verse 14, this sign certainly pointed the crowd in the right direction concerning their conclusion of who Jesus was. After witnessing this sign, which was of a different nature than the healings He had been doing and for which they were following Him, the crowd concluded that He was the Prophet prophesied in Deuteronomy 18:15 (cf. Acts 3:20-22).

However, verse 15 clearly reveals that in recognizing Jesus as a Messiah, these people had their own political and nationalistic agenda in mind. They rushed on Him to force Him to be their King, a Leader who would provide them with food and health (as His most recent miracles affirmed), and therefore the certain overthrow of Roman oppression.⁹ MacArthur states, “Their reaction typifies many who want a ‘Christ’ that makes no demands of them (cf. Matthew 10:34-39; 16:24-26), but of whom they can make their selfish personal requests.”¹⁰

What is the result of their misdirected recognition? In a somber concluding statement, the story shows Jesus “departing” “again” “[by] Himself” “alone.” Once again, man in his selfishness and blindness had separated himself from his Savior. They understood His identity, but were blind to His mission and purpose. They wanted to use Jesus’ divine power as their own personal miracle-worker or need-provider, rather than as a soul-Savior.

MacArthur writes:

Jesus does not acquiesce to whims or fancies. He comes to no man on that man’s terms. People cannot manipulate Him for their own selfish ends. Some modern evangelists, in an attempt to be “seeker-friendly,” present Jesus to unbelievers as a quick fix for felt needs like health, wealth, and self-esteem—superficially marketing Him as providing everything unbelievers want. But that turns the gospel message upside down. People do not come to Christ on their terms, so that He can heal their broken relationships, make them successful in

life, and help them feel good about themselves. Instead, they must come to Him on His terms. Jesus graciously loves believers and grants them a rich legacy of joy (John 15:11), peace (John 14:27), and comfort (2 Cor. 1:3–7). But at the same time, He calls sinners to mourn over their sin (Matt. 5:4), repent (Matt. 4:17), and acknowledge Him as the sovereign Lord (Rom. 10:9; cf. Phil. 2:9–11), to whom they owe complete obedience (John 14:15, 21; 1 John 5:3). Even today, He continues to withdraw from those who seek Him for their own self-serving ends, just as He did from the crowd that sought to make Him king on their terms. And, as becomes clear later in chapter 6, He drives others away with the hard demands of the gospel (v. 66).¹¹

Application: At this point, application can appropriately be made, especially to those who, like this crowd, are following Jesus with the wrong motives (vv. 2, 26) and who are, in essence, unbelievers. MacArthur’s quote above begins some of that application and challenges “seekers” to evaluate their view and valuation of Jesus. For our purposes in this lesson, we’ll allow his comments to suffice.

However, those thoughts need to be driven home further for believers—those who, like the twelve disciples, are in it for the long haul and are increasing in their spiritual perception regarding Jesus. This will be our goal in our final point, in which we will learn how Jesus desires us to interpret His signs.

Transition: As we study the context surrounding this paragraph, especially the following dialogue, the significance of this sign becomes apparent to us.

THE SIGNIFICANCE (context)

Why did Jesus do this sign, recorded in all four gospels? What was Jesus seeking to convey? In 5:19-47, Jesus had verbally established His identity as God; in 6:25-65, Jesus explained the significance of that identity; and in 6:1-15, Jesus illustrated that

significance with a miracle. To put that significance into a single statement, it's helpful to briefly trace the ensuing dialogue in John 6:25-65:

On the basis of the "sign" that He provided when He fed them in the wilderness, the Galilean crowds...mistake Jesus for...a king who will satisfy their material and political needs (6:14-15; cf. 18:36). This conviction deepens when they begin to suspect that Jesus crossed the lake the following night without a boat (6:25). Jesus makes clear to them, however, that they have not really "seen" the signs that He worked because they have failed to understand Him as the "food" from God that supplies eternal life (6:26-29). To this they respond, "What sign then will you do that we may see it and believe you?" (6:30...). When Jesus gives, instead of a sign, an explanation of His own death as the food and drink that gives eternal life (6:51-58), they comment that this is a hard teaching (6:60) and reject Him (6:66).¹²

MacArthur summarizes that point this way: "They flocked to see His works, but ultimately refused to accept His words (cf. v. 66). They sought the benefits of His power in their physical lives, but not in their spiritual lives."¹³ D. A. Carson echoes, "Their attention was focused on food (v. 26) and victory (v. 15)—not on the divine self-disclosure mediated through the incarnate Son, not on the Son as the bread of life, not on a realistic assessment of their own need."¹⁴

For our purposes, we'll summarize the significance of these signs this way: ***the signs don't say that you need Jesus'*** _____; ***the signs say that you just need Jesus*** (vv. 27, 29, 35). Throughout chapter 6, Jesus follows up this incredible miracle by trying to convince the crowd that, whereas the loaves were just a type, He was the figure, the reality—He Himself was the miracle! The multiplication of loaves (and the other miracles) wasn't intended to reveal His unique skills; it was designed to display His unquestioned sufficiency.

True followers of Jesus interpret the signs not with, "You did that? Wow, then You should be the King because You can fix all my problems." Rather, they witness the sign and understand, responding, "You did that? Wow, then You are the King, and I will believe You, accept Your words, and follow Your ways." Followers of Jesus don't expect Him to fix all their problems; but they do expect to experience Him in all of His full sufficiency (cf. Philippians 3:7-11).

It takes faith to be this kind of a disciple, because sight only sees the problem and doesn't see Jesus. It takes spiritual maturity to recognize that God is still good and thus life is still good, even when circumstances are not good. It requires the recognition that God's primary purpose for your life is spiritual, not material and physical. It demands that you think differently, plan differently, evaluate differently, pray differently, interact with people differently, and relate to Jesus differently.

Remember what's on the line here. It's possible to see Jesus and miss Him at the same time. We all claim to see Jesus, but if we misunderstand and "misuse" Jesus, He may withdraw Himself.

Application: Isn't it easy to pray in the loss of a relationship, "God, please give me friend." Isn't it easy to think, when money is running low, "Okay, we can cut here and pull back here; we can sell this, or do that." Isn't it easy to consider, when we receive a poor prognosis, "Lord, this is terrible. You've got to fix this!" We pray that nothing bad would happen to our kids; we reason that God really needs to just come through and provide a job for such-and-such a family; we ask why so-and-so would have to deal with such a terrible situation. And all along, we're guilty of what we read previously: we're demanding Jesus for His works, and we're ignoring His words; we're wanting Him to help our physical lives, while ignoring His plans for our spiritual lives; we're focused on the gifts, the provision, and not on the Giver and Provider; we are missing the miracle that is Jesus Himself, and totally overlooking our greatest need of Him.

Our prayer lives are probably the best indicator of whether or not we've appropriately understood the significance of Jesus' miracles. Too often, our requests are prayers for fixes, and we don't ask for God's fullness. When you consider Paul's prayers throughout his letters, you discover that he prayed the other way around. He prayed for God's fullness and for God's word to take deep root. And while I'm sure that he prayed for peoples' needs, his inscripturated prayers indicate that he did so through the lens of these signs—he prayed that people would experience Jesus.¹⁵



How might our prayers be effected in the following situations if we understand the true significance of the signs?

- In poor health – *NOT MERELY* “Lord, help so-and-so feel better” *BUT* “Lord, we pray for so-and-so in his sickness, and ask that you would teach him that You satisfy even more than perfect health does.”
- In the loss of a job – *NOT MERELY* “God, please give so-and-so his job back” *BUT* “God, we pray that you would help so-and-so to recognize that you can provide for His family even when he can't.”
- In a difficult break-up – *NOT MERELY* “Father, please give me another friend” *BUT* “Father, my heart is breaking because of losing so-and-so, but I pray that You'd help me believe that knowing You is of surpassing value and to keep myself from the idolatry of relationships.”
- In the loss of a loved-one – *NOT MERELY* “God, why did You do that?” *BUT* “God, remind me of specific truths that will comfort my hurting heart, and above all, secure my hope in my eternal and everlastingly satisfying relationship with you.”
- In daily responsibilities – *NOT MERELY*, “God, help me do well on this test” *BUT* “God, I've worked hard in preparation for this exam, and while I ask for your grace to do well on it, I also pray that you would help me be more concerned about pleasing you than pleasing men.”

See, the significance of the signs changes the way we interpret our world, the way we think about what happens, the way we talk to God, and the way we respond to Him. Some hear this explanation of Jesus' miracles, and they “walk no more with Him” (verse 66)—they only want a miracle worker who will meet their needs. But those that are seeking the significance of the signs will affirm, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life” (verse 68)—they recognize that the true miracle is in the person of Christ Himself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, consider an illustration of what this looks like from the perspective of a couple who has just sustained a miscarriage. Used with permission, the following excerpt depicts the way they wrestled to apply the significance of the signs to this disappointing situation.

While the situation itself is a disappointing and bitter consequence of Sin, we are thankful for the many truths that we have been able to think upon at this time (Philippians 4:8). By faith, we have been mindful:

- *That God is sovereign AND wise AND good, all the time, and that He's thinking about us at this time (Psalm 139:17-18);*
- *That we don't need to be strong, but rather we can “be strengthened in the Lord” whose strength is indeed sufficient (Ephesians 6:10; 1:18-2:7);*
- *That future pregnancies are certainly possible, but not promised; that God is our Portion, and while He's gracious to give us good gifts, He is of infinitely more value than those gifts, and we can never lose Him (Psalm 16:11);*
- *That the Gospel of Jesus Christ guarantees a day when sin and all of its consequences will be reversed, when the sufferings of this broken life will fade into the*

indescribable brilliance of “glory,” and when complete bliss in God's glorious presence will be the everlasting experience of His redeemed (Revelation 21:1-22:5);

- *That the Gospel of Jesus Christ convinces us that we are still everlastingly and overwhelmingly loved by a God whose unchanging favor towards us has been secured by Christ and whose tender “feeling” with us is experienced by Christ who is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15); therefore, we know that we are not under God's wrath, but His Shepherding care (Psalm 23:6); and*
- *That our little one was personally known to God, for Psalm 139:13-16 depicts a personal connection between the Creator and His creation, even when it was still an “unformed substance”; that this truth, the nature of God, and the comfort of David in II Samuel 12:23 indicates that our little one is enjoying the presence and Paradise of God (and a “meet-and-greet” with relatives) even now, and will do so for eternity in a soon-to-be resurrected and glorified body (I Corinthians 15:42-57); therefore, we can “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord our labor is not in vain.”*

Please continue to pray that we think upon these truths so that by faith they become the way we operate; that we will find our satisfaction in Christ and truly know what that means; and that we would be able to minister grace to others at this time (II Corinthians 1:3-4).

Jesus is the miracle, and the significance is that we can have Him.

ENDNOTES

¹ This same sign is also recorded in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:32-44, and Luke 9:10-17.

² John F. MacArthur, Jr., *John 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006), 220.

³ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, The New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002], 253) in MacArthur, 223.

⁴ Barley loaves were the staple bread for the very poor, and the fish would have been small and either dried or pickled, like sardines.

⁵ Jesus actually gives thanks for what He Himself is about to transform into the meal. We give thanks for the meal; Jesus gave thanks for the “pre-meal.”

⁶ MacArthur, 224.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Rather, they had witnessed or heard of Jesus’ miracles of healing, and they had been fed from food provided by his miraculous power. Surely nothing could prevent such a person from being the powerful liberator that so many children of Israel longed for. And if he was unwilling to assume the prerogatives and responsibilities of such leadership, they were more than willing to force the issue by fomenting a rebellion, crowning him king and daring the authorities to respond—thus forcing him to assume the mantle they had in mind for him” (D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary [Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991], 272).

¹⁰ *The MacArthur Study Bible*, ed. John MacArthur, Jr., electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), Jn 6:14.

¹¹ MacArthur, 225-26.

¹² Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 165.

¹³ MacArthur, 221.

¹⁴ Carson, 271.

¹⁵ Cf. Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:312; etc.