

UNMASKING FALSE DISCIPLES

John 6:22-34 (No. 36)

June 4, 2017

INTRODUCTION

John 6:22–34: "On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always.""

There have been few things more disappointing to me in the last 20 years than watching friends and acquaintances who at one time professed Christ later turn their backs on him and deny the faith. If you have been a Christian for a while, you probably know someone like that. If you haven't been a Christian for long, in time you will know someone like that.

Since the days of Jesus' earthly ministry, there have been those who turn away from Christ after following him for a time. Of course, the most well-known of these is Judas Iscariot. He was one of the 12 disciples. He observed the miracles that Jesus did. He was there for the feeding of the multitude. He was there when Jesus walked across the water. He was there and heard what Jesus had to say on that day in Capernaum in the synagogue when Jesus spoke the words in John 6. And he was there when, at the end of the chapter, many who had been following Jesus turned away from him and no longer walked with him. Judas was a witness of it all. And yet, one year later, Judas would commit the greatest betrayal in history and sell out Jesus, which led to Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

The biblical term for those who make a profession of faith in Christ and later turn away from him is apostate. The term comes from the Greek word *apostasia*. The word is sometimes translated "rebellion, falling away, or abandonment" (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:3). It's related to the Greek word for divorce.

An apostate is one who rebels against, falls away from, abandons the faith they formerly professed. The New Testament makes clear that true Christians never apostatize. Those who abandon the faith never had faith to begin with. You're familiar with 1 John 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us." Not every false disciple of Christ apostatizes. We know that some die self-deceived—trusting in themselves rather than Christ as their hope of acceptance with God.

But apostacy is a reality too. The dialogue between Jesus and the crowd that begins in John 6:22 and continues to the end of the chapter exposes the true versus the false disciples of Jesus. As we'll see, in this passage a crowd of people is before Jesus and his 12 disciples. This crowd was some of the multitude who had been fed by Jesus on the hillside the day before.

Jesus' teaching in the rest of this chapter divides the crowd, separating the true disciples of Jesus from the false. His teaching escalates through the chapter. He presses the crowd's belief system until they can take it no more. Look at the tragic way it ends beginning in verse 64.

Jesus said to the assembled crowd: "But there are some of you who do not believe." (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.)" Many at this moment turned from him. They ceased following him. They were unwilling to believe Jesus and what he taught.

He even turned to the Twelve:

John 6:67–71: "So Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him."

So that's where this chapter is headed. That's the result of Jesus' teaching in chapter 6. His followers will be divided and the true and the false will begin to separate.

What makes a true disciple of Jesus? How do you know if you are one? What are the characteristics of false disciples? Are there warning signs that we can discern from chapter 6 that could indicate who will defect? We'll find answers to these questions over the next few weeks as we make our way through Jesus' teaching in this chapter.

Recap

Now, we've been away from our study of John for a couple of weeks, so I want to remind us what we've seen so far. We left off with a study of two of the most well-known miracles that Jesus ever did.

Both of these miracles prove that Jesus is God because he does only what God can do. The first of these miracles we know as the feeding of the multitude or the feeding of the 5,000. This occurred in a remote area on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his 12 disciples were supposed to be on a little retreat. But crowds of people from all over followed Jesus in order to be healed or to see the spectacle.

Jesus and his disciples came to the east shore by a single boat. The crowds came by foot. The size of the crowd grew to likely 20,000 people—5,000 men plus women and children. On that day, as the day wore on, the people grew hungry and in this desolate area there simply wasn't enough for the people to eat. All the disciples could find for food among the crowd was a boy who had 5 barley loaves and two fish.

As it turns out, that was more than enough for Jesus to feed the crowd because he multiplied the five loaves and two fish so that every person there ate as much as they wanted and there was more left over than they started with. Jesus created food out of thin air and the crowd knew it. They saw and participated in the miracle.

As evening came, Jesus had his 12 disciples get back into the boat and start across the water to the other side—to Capernaum. Jesus stayed behind to dismiss the crowd and the plan was that he would meet up with disciples later. But in the night as the disciples rowed their boat toward Capernaum, a storm blew in and the sea became rough. The disciples were in the middle of the sea and battered by the waves. This was the scene for the second miracle.

In the black of night, during the storm, Jesus saw their struggle from his place of prayer miles away on the hillside. So he walked across the stormy sea and got in their boat. He came to comfort them with his presence. As soon as he got in the boat, the storm ceased and they immediately (miraculously?) landed at their destination in Capernaum.

All four gospels record Jesus feeding the multitude. Three of the gospels record Jesus walking on the water. But only John tells us what happened next. Some part of the multitude that Jesus fed stayed the night in the desolate area on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus and his disciples were now on the west side.

Verse 22 of chapter 6 picks up the story.

I. FALSE DISCIPLES FOLLOW CHRIST FOR SELFISH GAIN

John 6:22: "On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone."

The crowd understood the situation correctly. There was only one boat that Jesus and his disciples came in. The crowd saw his disciples get into that boat by themselves without Jesus.

So they presumed that Jesus had stayed the night somewhere in the area because it would have been unreasonable for him to leave by foot in the middle of the night during a storm. “Where could he be?” they wondered. In the morning, those who remained in the area overnight, began looking for him. (No doubt, some were hoping for breakfast from Jesus).

Now as it happened on that “next day,” some other boats had arrived that weren’t there the day before.

John 6:23: "Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks."

Why had these boats come? This was a desolate area. Tiberias was a major city located on the opposite side of the Sea. And yet, a number of boats had come from Tiberias and landed in the same area that Jesus performed his miracle the day before. Why?

We aren’t told the reason, but, given the circumstances, a plausible conjecture is that these boats were also out at Sea at night when the storm came. And the storm blew their boats into shore on the east bank into this remote area, where Jesus had performed his miracle of feeding the multitude only hours before.

In this we see the sovereign hand of God, who orchestrates all the events in order to get the remaining crowd over to Capernaum so that Jesus can give the teaching in this chapter.

John 6:24: "So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus."

They looked around, couldn’t find Jesus, so they got in these boats that “just happened” to be there and traveled to Capernaum. Capernaum was Jesus’ headquarters for the past year as he ministered in Galilee, so it made sense for them to start their search there.

Again, all 20,000 people didn’t make this journey. There weren’t that many boats. The night before, Jesus had dismissed the crowd and many left for home with full stomachs. But there was some size of a crowd that got into the boats. They were probably the most zealous followers, who didn’t want to go home without Jesus. They made it their mission to find him. They wouldn’t let him go. They would follow him all over the Sea of Galilee, if they had to.

They wanted to make him king. He was a good candidate. If he became king, they’d never have to labor for another meal. That would have been a massive benefit in a day when a meal was no guarantee for many of the poor.

So when they landed in Capernaum, they found Jesus. It wasn’t a large town, so that wasn’t hard to do. He was apparently in the town’s synagogue (v. 59). When they found him, they asked him a question. The question was a little odd given the situation.

John 6:25: "When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?""

We might expect them to ask, "*How* did you get here?" not "*When*?" The Greek even carries the idea, "*How long* have you been here?" I think the oddness of their question betrays their perplexity. They were confused by the whole thing, but were nevertheless glad they found their bread maker. Surely they were starving by now.

But Jesus wasn't interested in entertaining their curiosity. He knew why they had come. They weren't following him because they believed in him. They weren't eager to be his true disciples, even though they address him as Rabbi. Jesus knew their hearts and he confronted them.

John 6:26: "Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Jesus jumped straight to their true motivation in following him. O that they would have acknowledged for what they were the signs of healing and miraculous making of bread and fish. These signs were witnesses of his deity. But they didn't come because of that. They came because Jesus had filled their tummies full and they were ready for him to do it again.

The word "fill" (v. 26) is a coarse term for feeding and fattening animals. It's as if Jesus was saying, "You've grown fat at the trough and now you want another meal."

Now I want you to note something about the crowd. As we study the rest of this chapter, Jesus unmask those who are not true followers of Christ, those who are superficially attached to Christ, yet will leave him when the teaching gets hard. As he does that, we'll note along the way characteristics of false disciples.

Here, Jesus begins their unmasking by unmasking their motivation. They followed Jesus for selfish reasons. They weren't there to learn from him and give God glory by believing in him.

So note this: the first characteristic of a false disciple is that they follow Christ for selfish gain. For them, following Jesus is all about what they can get out of it. It's a quest for personal fulfillment. They want a handout, not Christ. They want the bread, not the bread-giver. They are attracted to the promises of Christ, but are not willing to accept the demands of Christ. They don't want life-change, they want life-enhancement. They want a better circumstance, but no self-denial. False disciples of Christ are selfishly motivated.

So Jesus challenges them.

John 6:27: "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal."

In effect, Jesus says, “You’ve come to me this day wanting another meal. You’ve done all this work—seeking to find me—in order to give more for your stomach. But what you need is a meal that produces eternal life—a meal that eaten once sustains you forever. The Son of Man gives this meal.”

The Son of Man, of course, is Jesus—his favorite way to refer to himself. This “food that endures to eternal life” is a gift from the Son of Man. Jesus has the full authority of heaven to offer eternal life because God the Father has set his seal on him. He is stamped, so to speak, as authentic and divine.

II. FALSE DISCIPLES SEEK SALVATION BY WORKS

Jesus engages in a bit of word play in verse 27, which further unmasks these false disciples. He tells them to “work for the food that endures to eternal life” and yet he says the Son of Man *gives* them this food. What he means is that they should have been striving and motivated by gaining eternal life, and yet they were consumed with getting another meal from Jesus.

Nevertheless, eternal life is a gift and not something you gain by works. Seek eternal life, but know that it is a gift.

But look at how the crowd respond in verse 28:

John 6:28: "Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?”"

The “works of God” means the works that God requires. So they are saying to Jesus, “Tell us what God requires and we will do those works.” In other words, they want to know how they can earn eternal life.

This is the second characteristic of false disciples: they seek salvation by works. They actually believe they can do what God requires and be granted this bread of eternal life. They have completely ignored Jesus’ words that eternal life is a gift from the Son of Man. They count themselves worthy enough to live up to God’s standard and earn salvation.

But salvation doesn’t come that way. No one in the history of the world has been saved by works. No one. Not in the Old Testament. Not in the New Testament. It is always by grace through faith.

Paul writes in Romans 3:28: "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." The righteousness we need to live with God is given to us. Paul writes also in Romans 4:3: "For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”"

Just as it was with Abraham before the law, so it is with everyone.

He continues in verse 5: "And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness," Faith in Christ is required. Works cannot save.

So Jesus corrects the crowd's error and tells them the only way to gain eternal life.

John 6:29: "Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.""

What does God require of you? To believe in the one whom he has sent. Who is that? Jesus.

John 3:17: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

III. FALSE DISCIPLES ARE ATTRACTED TO THE MIRACULOUS

Well, this doesn't satisfy the crowd. It is almost unbelievable what they say to him next. Before them is Jesus, who they have called Rabbi and who they want to make king. This is the crowd that ate of the bread he made on the other side of the Sea. They knew he did a miracle. They ate the miracle. But their hearts are so hardened to Jesus that they unbelievably say this in verse 30:

John 6:30: "So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"

The crowd is saying, "Jesus, if you want us to believe that you give eternal life and that we must believe you, then show us a sign. Do a miracle to prove it."

Here's the third trait of false disciples: they are attracted to the miraculous. Ordinary grace is never enough. They want miracles. The bigger and showier, the better. The charismatic movement is filled with charlatans who gain following because they claim to do the miraculous. They are always seeking signs.

We hear of huge crowds in Africa who come to see people supposedly healed raised from the dead, and who have demons cast out. It's all a fraud. But it gains a crowd. It is at least successful in one thing: it creates a legion of false disciples.

We don't have to go overseas to witness this. Turn on TBN and the airwaves are filled with false teachers who make millions off of false disciples taken in by supposed miracles. And we could go on and name the International House of Prayer or Bill Johnson at Bethel Church in Redding, California. Gold dust falls from the ceiling. The fog machine works overdrive so that the people think it is the cloud of glory. And on and on.

False disciples are engrossed with the miraculous. It has always been this way. Many follow Jesus superficially because they are convinced they have seen miracles. Satan will even use this to his advantage in the last days.

Jesus says in Mark 13:22–23: "For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand."

The days are coming when the demons will perform signs and wonders through men to deceive and the signs will be so deceptive that it will almost deceive God's chosen. But God won't let it happen.

IV. FALSE DISCIPLES MAKE DEMANDS ON GOD

Sadly, this crowd before Jesus doesn't stop there.

John 6:31: "Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' ""

They are referring to the time when manna came from heaven and fed *all* of Israel during the time of Moses' leadership. This is a challenge to Jesus. They are insinuating that Jesus' miracle of feeding 20,000 was nothing compared to the bread that came from heaven when Moses led Israel. All of Israel was fed day after day for 40 years (Exodus 16:35). That's a miracle, they thought! So if they were going to believe Jesus, they wanted a miracle as great as Moses'.

Jesus corrected them again.

John 6:32: "Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven."

The source of the miracle was the Father not Moses.

Then he says (v. 33): "For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."" "He!" The bread is a person. The bread they need is Jesus. Jesus didn't come down to give bread but to be bread. That's why you must believe in him. Until you eat of him through faith, you will never have eternal life.

Jesus is the banquet feast of bread. But unless you taste of him, you cannot be saved. You must eat of Jesus and the way you do that is by believing in him. Jesus is who they need. He *is* the miracle. He is the true manna of heaven.

How did they respond?

John 6:34: "They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always.""

They still didn't get it. They still didn't want him, but just what he would give.

So here is the fourth characteristic of false disciples: they make demands on God.

They demand from him a miracle in verse 30 and demand from him bread always in verse 34.

Gimme!

Because they are selfishly motivated, they have no problems making demands on God. They treat him as their butler. When life doesn't go well for them, they are mad at God and act as if God has dealt with them unfairly. They expect unceasing material blessings. They haven't bowed their knees to the king. They've made themselves kings and God their servant.

CONCLUSION

So there are four characteristics of false disciples that we see as Jesus unmasks them:

1. False disciples follow Christ for selfish gain.
2. False disciples seek salvation by works.
3. False disciples are attracted to the miraculous.
4. False disciples make demands on God.

It only gets worse, as we'll see. But it is important for us to compare ourselves to the false disciples, lest we be proven to be one of them.

It is simple how not to be a false disciple. The passage gives us a clear answer: simply believe in Christ. He is Lord. He is Savior. He is God. Yield all of you to all of him. Turn from your sin and trust in him as the sacrifice for your sin and be saved.

That's our message to those who superficially follow Christ but do not believe in him. Our message isn't go to church, listen to this message, or read this book. But first, our message is believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

We'll continue on next week.