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### **Pursuing the Imperishable**

**John 6: 25-27; I Corinthians 9: 24-25**

During this Lenten season when we accept the necessity of spiritual discipline, we do well to remember that our Lord was tempted to turn stones into bread. Deep into his own fast, Jesus felt keenly the cruel bite of hunger – yet our Lord summoned the strength to refuse the temptation. Certainly, there was nothing wrong with eating bread, but Jesus sensed in this invitation a sinister aspect, the lure of using his estimable powers in the pursuit of the perishable, when in truth his gifts were to be oriented toward an entirely different Kingdom. Jesus refused the Tempter, saying, “We do not live by bread alone.” What he meant was, ultimately, we do not live by bread at all, but by the nourishment of the eternal.

The temptation our Jesus nobly resisted is one to which the rest of us more easily succumb. After feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and fish, Jesus found a huge crowd gathered at his next engagement. He was not surprised; neither was he beguiled. “You have come,” he said, “for all the wrong reasons. You have come for the bread. You’ve come for more fish. You are fixated on the ‘signs.’ But the signs are only important in that they point beyond themselves to the Source that provides these signs. You focus on the perishable, when my ministry and my Kingdom are about the imperishable.”

Paul makes a hauntingly similar observation. He calls his fellow Christians to take a look at the athletes around them. Look, says Paul, they devote their lives to training. They endure fierce deprivation; they embrace incredible exertion. For what? To win some laurel that will fade, some wreath that will turn brown and wither, as will their glory. But we are called to invest our lives pursuing that which does not fade, the eternal nourishment of the Kingdom of God. This sounds rather easy. In truth this is one of the greatest challenges of life.

I read of a young man who came to Hollywood with three ambitions. He wanted to see his name in lights; he wanted to marry a beauty queen; he wanted to own a Rolls Royce. By the age of thirty he had achieved all three goals. But having achieved them, he awakened one morning to realize that he had no further view of what to do with his life. He lapsed into a purposeless depression from which he almost did not emerge. His story is amazingly similar to that of Gary Gaetti, an infielder for the Minnesota Twins, who dreamed of and dedicated his whole life to winning the World Series. Then he won it. (He wouldn’t have, if the Atlanta Braves’ Lonnie Smith had run the bases correctly in game seven of the Series, but that’s a whole ‘nother story.) To Gaetti’s utter amazement, even as he climbed off the celebratory human pile on the pitcher’s mound and walked off the field, he found himself thinking, “This isn’t as great as I thought it would be.” Having reached the pinnacle of his profession he found that the view at the top was of nothing. That very moment of great triumph spawned within him a quest for the spiritual life, awakening in him a hunger for the imperishable. That moment began his Christian journey.

You'd have to be a true sports trivia freak to remember the name of Mark Lenzi. He actually won a gold medal in diving at the Barcelona Games in 1992 for the United States. He thought this would change his life. He assumed that winning the gold medal would put him on Wheaties boxes, win him lucrative endorsements. He expected to be a household name. Obviously, none of that happened. Mark Lenzi woke up the morning after winning Olympic gold medal to find that his life was the same. Lenzi quit his sport, became grossly out of shape, regarded his life as over, became depressed and suicidal. But then, a year or so before the next Olympics, he caught the diving bug again. Amazingly, he snagged the last spot on the American diving team, then dove well enough at the Atlanta Games to win a bronze medal. Disappointment, right? No: that bronze medal brought him a joy that the gold had never given him, because he was no longer diving to win medals. He had come to learn that what brought him satisfaction was simply the joy of diving. To take pleasure in doing something well for its own sake and not for what it might gain you is to draw nigh to the truth of which Paul and our Lord speak when they talk of pursuing an imperishable prize.

Herman Melville's great character, Captain Ahab, talked of the mute face of the great white whale as a "mask," behind which lay an entire reality of depth and meaning. Ahab talked of wanting "to strike through the mask" to reach the reality that lay behind it. His ambition echoes the wisdom of Jesus who says, Don't fixate on the 'signs.' The bread and fish, all of life, the entire material world, your homes, your children, your jobs, your friends, your pursuits, your pleasures, they are all signs meant to thrust your vision beyond the physical world into the realm of the eternal. All of life is meant to point our vision toward the reality of God who gives us all things. But we often become so fixated on the signs that we come to think of the material world as all there is. When two parents behold their newborn, they are filled with wonder at this life they have brought into the world. Their experience ought to evoke wonder about a universe that would allow such a wonder to be introduced – and what is the Source beyond the universe? I once had a parent tell me when I was coaching baseball, "Oh, we'll be at the tournament. We never miss a baseball game. We'll drive our kids anywhere for a sporting event. However, we don't have time for church." I was too stunned to say, "Ma'am, you are feeding your kids a wonderful diet of perishable pursuits, yet you are leaving them starved for the imperishable. They may reach adolescence with a room full of dust-gathering trophies and wonderful hand-eye co-ordination, but also an empty soul. They may reach adolescence without the spiritual gifts necessary to make tough spiritual decisions in a dangerous world."

I receive every kind of promotional theme tied to the Gospel. Most have the same sickening theme. Come to Jesus our way and be a success. Come to Jesus and find the pathway to financial security. Come to Jesus our way and find the perfect mate. Come to Jesus and tap the secret to physical health. *All of these promotions rest on the tacit notion that our faith is a means to an end. Our allegiance to God is not regarded as an end unto itself but a vehicle designed to bring us pleasure.* In truth, there is a modicum of truth hidden among these vulgar claims. A wealth of statistical evidence suggests that families that are involved in religious communities together are healthier than their peers. Families that are involved in a religious community tend to live longer. Their divorce rate tends to be lower. Their children tend to be better adjusted. A wealth of evidence suggests that participation in a religious community is good for people

physically, psychologically and economically – but that is not why we participate!  
Such benefits are just byproducts.

What Jesus said long ago is still enduringly true:

“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all other things will be yours as well.”

All those other blessings are perishable wreaths.

Only the Kingdom of God is imperishable.

So, what do we have to do to earn God’s imperishable prize? What do we have to do?

Here is the amazing truth. We don’t have to *do* anything.

God just gives it to us. God gives it to us freely for loving God purely.

Here is another of those extraordinary universal truths.

*God gives us the blessing of imperishable strength simply for loving God purely.*

In my mind’s eye, I see one of the most gifted Baptist preachers of the last generation,  
a man of immeasurable influence, now recently deceased.

He has delivered prestigious lectures, pastored large churches, is accounted a celebrated success.

Yet he is sitting among his peers, pouring out his heart, because his soul reverberates with emptiness.

He has spent his life pursuing God’s imperishable prizes, always assuming that those prizes were conditional  
upon his achievement. He can hear congregations saying after each great sermon,

“Give us more!” to the point that he has become paralyzed with anxiety.

His marriage has foundered, though to all appearances theirs is a match made in heaven.

But he knows there is no true intimacy; he had pursued her because she had seemed unattainable.

So he is sitting among friends, asking, “What do I have to do to experience God’s grace?”

A colleague says to him, “John, when our Lord says to us, ‘You are the light of the world,’  
he does not say that you have to *become* the light.

He does not say that you have to do anything to be the Light. He just says, ‘*You are light.*’

He does not say that you must attain number one to receive the light.

He does not say you have to achieve a certain plateau. He says simply, ‘*You are light.*’

If you and I could hear that down in our guts – really experience what it means, then we could do what Jesus  
goes on to say, we could let our light shine and other people could see the good thing  
that God has created and could give glory to the Father in heaven.”

John Claypoole said that when he heard those words it was as if  
his soul flushed with fire and the top of his head floated off.

I sat in a room with a man this week and did a very hard thing: we planned his funeral.

We talked about his burial, discussing the particulars of his memorial service, which we both know is  
imminent. There was a quiver in his voice, and there were tears in his eyes,

but there was in his being an incredible sense of peace, a great calm, a palpable strength of character.

He knows, no doctor can help him, no medicine can cure him, no earthly power can deliver him.

But he has peace, for he has lived in life in conversation with the imperishable power of God  
and has been continually nourished by God’s Spirit. It is well with his soul. It is well with his soul.

Why did Christ not turn the stones to bread?

Because he could envision a dark night of anguish in a garden surrounded by olive trees  
when no earthly bread could nourish him. All that could feed his soul then was imperishable power.

Why did Paul write of orienting his life around the Reality of the imperishable?

Because he could think back to times when his back was laid raw by the lash,

when he hung imprisoned in chains, when he stood in the dock, bashed by accusers and critics,  
and knew that in such moments the only thing that sustained him was God’s imperishable strength.

My friends, there will be times when life thrust you into situations when your own strength will not be sufficient to deliver you. Your own wisdom, your efforts to manipulate and control the future, will prove inadequate. In such moments, all of your achievements will seem vain, all of your ambitions a mockery. In such moments you will realize that you are overwhelmed and alone. Your spirit will find itself in darkness.

*In such moments, you will know that your faith is an instrument for tapping into the imperishable power of God's Spirit, or you will know that your faith is nothing at all.*

There will come a time when your sense of God will be the Reality that fills your soul with light, or you will be bereft of hope.

May our lives be a prayer that serves to root our ambitions in that which really matters, the imperishable Kingdom of God.

For only the nourishment of the imperishable can make it well with our souls. We must cast ourselves upon God in utter trust. In utter trust. For this is why God has called us into being.

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