

**'What shall we do that we may work the works of God', John 6. 28.
Bethesda Coffee Morning. 11 March 2009.**

You may remember that we are working our way through some of the important questions to be found in the Gospel of John. And this morning we have reached a question directed to Jesus by a crowd who had long sought Him and had now found Him ... 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?'

But if we are to understand the question, why it was asked, and our Lord's answer to it, we shall need to know a little of the background.

Well, the story so far. Following the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (5,000 men, we are told¹ – plus an unspecified number of women and children), Jesus and His disciples had crossed the north section of the Sea of Galilee, from the east to Capernaum,² some way to the west. The Lord had sent His disciples on ahead in the only boat available, while - initially – He had ascended a nearby mountain to pray. And later – sometime between three and six o'clock in the morning – He had joined them ... 'walking', we are told, 'on the sea' – and together they had continued the journey to Capernaum.³

But, as the day broke, many of the multitude who had been fed from the five loaves and two fish began to hunt for Jesus. Knowing that there had only been one boat by the shore and that He had not entered that boat before it left, they couldn't figure out where He had gone. But, as it happened, at that very moment, several boats came up the lake to them from Tiberias in the south-west. Aware that, sometime before, our Lord had set up His base in Capernaum,⁴ they speculated that He may somehow have gone there – and so, boarding the boats, they crossed to that town⁵ ... where they found our Lord in the local synagogue.⁶

I shall let John take up the story at that point ...

*'When they found Him ... they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"
Jesus answered them and said ... "You seek me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you"
They said therefore to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?"
Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent".'*

It is clear then that our question for this morning arose out of a misunderstanding on the part of our Lord's hearers. They had first enquired when it was He had arrived at Capernaum. But Jesus showed no interest in satisfying their curiosity. Rather, knowing their inner thoughts, He questioned their motive for seeking Him – seeking Him, indeed, with such great toil and effort. 'You seek me', He said in effect, 'not because you grasped the spiritual significance of the miraculous feeding – pointing you, as it did, to faith in me as God's Son and Messiah – but simply because your stomachs were filled. Your chief – indeed your only – concern lies with that which is outward and temporary, and not with that which is inward and eternal.⁷ You ought rather pour your energies into obtaining, not the 'food which perishes', but that 'food' – referring to Himself, and, as He explains later in the chapter, to His sacrificial death⁸ ... that 'food' which, when appropriated by faith, both supplies and sustains eternal life.

But they missed the point completely. Failing to understand the real – the spiritual – meaning of what He said, they supposed He spoke of literal 'food' – of some magical and ever-fresh bread, the eating of which would bring them eternal life – some 'Long Life Bread' that would be! But they also took literally His encouragement that they should 'work' for that 'food' which secures eternal life – supposing that there were some special actions and deeds which God required them to perform that they might earn themselves a place in His favour and in His kingdom.

Our Lord's answer straightened out their thinking ... 'This', He said, 'is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent'. And why had He been 'sent', please? John told us plainly back in chapter 3, 'God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved'.⁹

The point our Lord was making was that obtaining eternal life is not a matter of the 'works' which **we do while we are in the world**, but of the great 'work' which **He did while He was in the world**. I think of the words He prayed later in this very gospel, 'I have finished the work which you gave me to do'.¹⁰

'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?', they asked. Rejecting any idea then that God's favour is in some way earned by human merit or actions, Jesus replied, 'This is the work of God, that you *believe* in Him whom He sent'. As the apostle Paul later expressed it, 'By grace (by God's free favour¹¹) you have been saved, through *faith* ... *not of works* lest anyone should boast'.¹²

Salvation from sin certainly isn't a question of what **I** can do. It is all to do with what **the Lord Jesus** did – and what **God** can do.

Last week, I came across the following true story. Stuart Hamblen was a well known singer, song-writer and radio celebrity in Hollywood back in the 1940s. He was also noted for his drinking, gambling, and womanizing. One of Stuart Hamblen's big hits at the time was titled, "I won't go hunting with you Jake, but I'll go chasing women". He also frequently played the 'bad guy' in films of the day, films starring the likes of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers.

Then one day a young evangelist came to the area,¹³ preaching the gospel in a marquee. Stuart interviewed the young man on his radio show, and then ventured into one of his meetings. Early in the service that evening, the young preacher claimed, 'There is a man in this audience who is a big fake'. No doubt the cap fitted several there, but Stuart was convinced that *he* was the one the preacher was talking about.

And those words continued to haunt him until a couple of nights later he showed up at the preacher's hotel door in the early hours of one morning, asking the young evangelist to pray for him. Apparently, the preacher's response was something along the lines, 'This is between you and God, and I'm not going to get in the middle of it'. After they talked for some time, Stuart dropped to his knees, cried to God for mercy and committed his life to Christ.

Stuart Hamblen stopped his drinking, his womanizing and the rest. Later he was fired by the radio station because he refused to do a commercial promoting alcohol.

At a party soon after his conversion, John, a friend with whom Stuart had occasionally appeared in Hollywood films, challenged him, 'What's this I hear ... *you* got religion, and you don't want a drink?'¹⁴ 'It's no secret', Stuart answered, 'what God can do ...', to which John responded, 'Sounds like a song!'

Later, sitting alone at home, Stuart began writing that song. Hearing a clock strike the hour, he jotted down the words, 'The chimes of time ring out the news, another day is through. Someone slipped and fell. Was that someone you?'¹⁵ – and in 17 minutes he had composed what was to prove a great gospel classic of that period – 'It Is No Secret'.¹⁶

Perhaps I should tell you that Stuart's friend at the party was 'the Duke',¹⁷ John Wayne, and the young preacher who led Stuart Hamblen to the Lord was Billy Graham.

The chorus of Stuart's song reads ...

'It is no secret what God can do.
What He's done for others, He'll do for you.
With arms wide open, He'll pardon you.
It is no secret what God can do'.

And, interestingly, Stuart Hamblen's words, 'With arms wide open, He'll pardon you', connect well with the promise which Jesus made only a few minutes after being asked our question for this morning ... 'the one who comes to me I will by no means cast out'.¹⁸

Footnotes

¹ John 6. 10 (second part); the opening of the verse refers literally to making 'the people' recline. But we are explicitly told that the number of 'men' (males) who reclined were 5,000.

² John 6. 17. For Mark's reference to 'Bethsaida', Mark 6. 45, see D. A. Carson on Matthew 14. 22.

³ Matt. 14. 22-33; John 6. 15-21.

⁴ Matt. 9. 1.

⁵ John 6. 22-24.

⁶ John 6. 59.

⁷ Like the woman at the well in John 4, they saw Him as an easy way to eliminate the need of obtaining natural resources and nourishment. See John 4. 15; 6. 34.

⁸ John 6. 53-58.

⁹ John 3. 17.

¹⁰ John 17. 4.

¹¹ It has been well said that 'Everyone needs what no-one deserves!'

¹² Eph. 2. 8-9.

¹³ Los Angeles, to be precise.

¹⁴ That last part is based on what Stuart Tamblen said in the video at ...

http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ea3f443587dea07e3ccd

¹⁵ This circumstance being quoted in ...

http://www.texasescapes.com/DEPARTMENTS/Guest_Columnists/East_Texas_all_things_historical/CreatGospelClastic1BB901.htm

¹⁶ 'It Is No Secret' became the first 'cross-over' gospel, country and pop ballad, reaching the number one spot on all three charts. www.snopes.com/religion/hamblen.asp? Billy Graham and Stuart Hamblen can be watched together at ... http://www.tangle.com/view_video.php?viewkey=ea3f443587dea07e3ccd ... during which Stuart sings 'It Is No Secret'. And note Billy Graham's statement ... 'it was the turning point of our ministry'. For God was 'doing' something which even Mr. Hamblen didn't realize at the time. He (the Lord) was using Stuart's conversion to launch Billy Graham into large-scale evangelistic opportunities. And I shouldn't like to guess how many people will be in heaven as a result of Billy Graham's wider ministry!

¹⁷ In John Wayne's own words, 'There've been a lot of stories about how I got to be called Duke. One was that I played the part of a duke in a school play, which I never did. Sometimes, they even said I was descended from royalty! It was all a lot of rubbish ... the truth is that I was named after a dog!' John Wayne was born Marion Michael Morrison in Winterset, Iowa. When young Marion was six, the family moved to California, eventually settling in Glendale. Marion delivered newspapers in the morning with his trusty Airedale, 'Duke'. The local firemen called them 'Big Duke' and 'Little Duke'. Marion later accepted a full scholarship to play football at the University of Southern California. In the summer of 1926, head coach Howard Jones fixed Duke up with a job as an assistant prop man on the set of a John Ford movie. And the rest, as they say, is history!

<http://ask.yahoo.com/20010529.html>

¹⁸ John 6. 37.