

MANNA, MEAT, & MONEY

(An appeal for a less self-indulged and more Christ-centered Christianity)

I don't want to come across as a self-appointed spokesman for the Church or be mean spirited in my assessment of what I observe in our Christian family. But those of you who know me will notice right off that this is one of my more in-your-face essays, so if you were looking for something a little lighter, you might want to click onward to something a little more entertaining. Let me summarize ahead of time so that you can decide whether or not to read further.

I was tracing the “manna” story in both Testaments recently and then on to the story about the “meat” that Israel demanded when they grew weary of eating the same thing everyday. God gave them the meat they wanted, but it didn't turn out well at all for them. As the old saying goes, “Be careful what you pray for!” It seems to me that many supposed Christians are not at all satisfied with “just Jesus” and have settled for an entitled brand of Christianity wherein they demand of God what they want and what he is obligated to supply. The spiritual water table has been so depleted that they are bored with their daily diet of simple manna and expect from God more than he promises (at least in this world). As a result they're overfed, underchallenged, and sickly.

I think the manna and meat (an later, money) passages address these modern tendencies in a representative way.

- **Manna** represents Jesus, the true Bread from Heaven, and God's promised daily provision of lavish life in him. When we lose our sense of gratitude for what God gives us, we tend to demand a more extravagant diet than the simple daily manna.
- **Meat** (in the form of quail) to which we're convinced we're entitled, represents the lust for something more than mere manna. If we demand it we might get it and will certainly eventually regret it.
- **Money**, well, you know what that represents.

For those willing to stick with me on this, I'll try to unpack some passages and their application to our present Western Church culture. While I'll do my best to be brief, it'll take some explaining. If you'll read these passages ahead of time to refresh your memory of the narrative around the story about “manna,” my musings might make more sense to you. (Exodus 16, Numbers 11, Psalm 78:29-30, Psalm 106:14-16, John 6:32-40, and 2 Corinthians 8:13-15)

MANNA

⁴ Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. ⁵ On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days.”

⁶ So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “In the evening you will know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt, ⁷ and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we, that you should grumble against us?”...

¹³ That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. ¹⁴ When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. ¹⁵ When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was.

Moses said to them, “It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat. ¹⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Everyone is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer for each person you have in your tent.’”

¹⁷ The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. ¹⁸ And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Everyone had gathered just as much as they needed.

¹⁹ Then Moses said to them, “No one is to keep any of it until morning.”

²⁰ However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

²¹ Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. ²² On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. ²³ He said to them, “This is what the Lord commanded: ‘Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.’” **Exodus 16:1-23**

One day after the Jews’ flight from Egypt manna started dropping out of heaven and kept coming every morning (except on Saturdays) for forty years. The refugees didn’t know what it was (manna means “What is it?”) but since they had little else to eat and because God told them to, they collected it, brought it home, cooked it, and ate it. While traipsing through the wilderness they ate it morning, noon and night for four decades. From the Exodus to the Promised Land the Jews were nourished by something they never really comprehended.

To put the enormity of the miracle in perspective someone calculated that in order to feed two to three million people it would take 1500 tons of food a day, which would require deliveries from a freight train full of manna two miles long every day for 40 years!

A millennium and a half later, like manna, Jesus, “the true Bread from heaven” showed up out of heaven and taught his prospective followers to feast on him.

... it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ “Sir,” they said, “always give us this bread.”

³⁵ Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty...

⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. ⁵⁰ But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

⁵⁶ Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven. **John 6**

Manna from heaven was a preview of the Man from heaven. As manna sustained the Jews, Jesus is the sole/soul nourishment to all those who follow him today. In the same way that their physical survival depended on their daily allotment of manna, so our spiritual survival depends exclusively on Jesus. We have no life at all except the life he is to us. He’s the way and truth, but more – he’s the life, our only life!

As the Jews asked, “What is it?” Jesus’ disciples queried among themselves, “Who is this man (that even the wind and waves obey him)?” We no more apprehend the inestimably worthy Son of God than the Jews did the manna that appeared atop the morning dew. Our earth-bound and deficient understanding notwithstanding; we love him, trust him, and feed on him.

In spite of the attempts of some to give a natural explanation for the manna, it was clearly a supernatural substance. If it were something in nature, they would have recognized it and wouldn’t have questioned, “What is it?” Plus, it arrived right on schedule every morning for forty years, evaporated in the afternoon, and spoiled if kept overnight except on the Sabbath! Similar objections have always been posed regarding Jesus, the “Bread from heaven.” Contrary to his claims to divinity they say that he was a “good man,” even the most godly of men, but certainly not the supernaturally the God-Man.

Moses’ contemporaries were told to gather manna everyday and not store it up lest it spoil. Likewise we are advised to routinely ingest the flesh and blood of Jesus. We were re-created to live solely on a daily diet of Jesus and not depend exclusively on some by-gone conversion experience. We have to digest what we gather today and not memorialize what we possessed yesterday. Yesterday’s manna will not do for today, nor today’s for tomorrow! We require a regular diet of the Person of Jesus and live each moment in the strength of that meal.

Some people gather lots of manna, more than they ever expect to use. They lust more for a reputation of a diligent gatherer than for Jesus himself. Their religious spirit gives them the appearance of spiritual superstars and rack up impressive caches of memorized verses, but have no intention of doing what they say. At the end of the day their stockpiled manna looks and smells like rotted fruit. They might appear to be accumulating heavenly food far more diligently than others, but they’re more like collectors of spiritual information than authentic lovers of Jesus.

My plea here is not so much for regular “devotions,” saying daily prayers, or even reading the Bible everyday. As important as those are, they’re simply vehicles that help us interact with God. They don’t save us like Jesus saves us or transform us as he does. The disciplines are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. He said, “*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you*

have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

At best, doing devotions (or whatever you like to call it) is the morning manna gathering. But it's only the “gathering,” not the meal. Putting your favorite restaurant's menu to memory is fine, but it doesn't have the same effect as actual eating! The menu isn't the meal. Jesus, the Bread from heaven, is our meal; he's our life. Even those who are faithful to the morning gathering can remain malnourished for failing to ingest and absorb *him!* You might have gathered and stored an entire loaf of Heaven's Bread, but it's not for storing, it's for eating and for living in the strength of the meal.

When Jesus told the crowd to make a meal of him a lot of incredulous fans left his orbit. “*This is a hard teaching,*” they said. It wasn't that it was *hard to comprehend* as much as it was *hard to swallow*. And swallow him is exactly what we have to do if we want to be more than fans, but followers.

If he'd taught them some new way to pray, creeds to say, or disciplines to practice they'd have stayed with him till the cows came home. But he didn't come here to give us new bread baking recipes. He was – and is – the Bread that, when eaten, produces life – abundant and eternal.

It's human nature to prefer spiritual recipes wherein we have some control over the outcome. But he indicated that we're spiritually dead and that our only hope is to take this Bread inside of us, so that he can live his way in and through us.

That's what makes this such a “hard teaching” for sure. He didn't come *to bring bread* but *to be Bread – The Bread*. His mission wasn't to guide us to God, but to be God in us, living like God through us! It's hard because we want to have more to do with our spirituality than we actually do. It's hard on our ego. It's hard because we can't get ourselves to believe that *living for him is all about him living in us*.

At least those who turned back and no longer followed him were honest about their mistaken expectations of Jesus. They thought they were something other than they were and wanted him to be something other than what he was. They were looking for more of a generous landlord type of Messiah rather than a live-in Savior who takes over.

I wonder how many of us would turn back if we really understood that he's not a life-support system, but our life's blood. He doesn't so much change our lives but exchanges our lives with his. The “hard teaching” of Jesus is that only Jesus can live like Jesus, and if we'll take him in, he will live like himself in us!

“... I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me...”

Going back to the Jews in the desert...

Next we'll see how little appreciation the original manna eaters had for God's ample supply and how they demanded “meat” instead.

MEAT

⁴ The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat! ⁵ We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. ⁶ But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”...

Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it.¹⁹ You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days,²⁰ but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it—because you have rejected the Lord, who is among you, and have wailed before him, saying, “Why did we ever leave Egypt?””

Numbers 11

“We detest this miserable food!” **Numbers 21:5**

Not long after the indefinable miracle bread began arriving, some of the manna eaters got tired of the same thing everyday for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and midnight snack. All they could think of was the fare they enjoyed in Egypt. What a slap in God’s face to compare manna from heaven to meat from Egypt!

To be fair, how would you feel about eating the same thing for forty years – nothing but manna day in and day out? We in developed countries are accustomed to having a vast dietary variety at our disposal at our local grocery store* and wouldn’t tolerate the same thing for dinner two nights in a row, let alone for decades! But in much of the developing world if they have one or maybe two meals a day it’s boon time! Forget varying their diet. It’s rice and curry or beans and tortillas. Seldom are they ever actually what we would call “full” after a meal. You don’t hear starving people complain about having to eat the same food every day and night. They’re just glad to have enough to keep them alive another day.

* Between 1975 and 2008, the number of products in the average supermarket swelled from an average of 8,948 to almost 47,000, according to the Food Marketing Institute. Option overload is when you can choose between nine varieties of Pringles and eleven flavors of Cheerios!

Let’s unpack the meat-lust of our culture – especially our Christian culture.

Meat versus Manna

Their complaint, “we have lost our appetite,” sounds frightening similar to the condition of the Western Church where there’s little appetite for the Bread of Heaven. Our hunger is often more about feeling comfortable and looking better rather than being more in love with him.

Our lust for meat exposes of our lack of love for manna. We’re bored with the diet of heavenly manna because we’re not actually feeding on Christ. We gather gigabytes of spiritual information and do tons of church activities without actually ingesting the Bread of Life. This may be the fault of the feeders or the eaters or both. I’m more concerned in this writing about the eaters, those who go to church expecting the keys to the American Dream wrapped in Bible verses. They seem to want something more than Jesus, something more scintillating to the taste. If we filled up on Jesus our lust for something else – something more – would wane. Guaranteed.

We've developed a craving for the kind of Jesus that appeals to our palate! "Jesus is just alright with me (an obvious phrase coining), but there's more to life than just Jesus, right? I'm especially alright with him if he gives me what I want. He's better than Buddha because Buddha didn't promise me a profit in the stock market."

Jesus is a means to an end, a utilitarian Messiah, the kind that the Jews in Jesus' day were waiting for. He kept having to remind even those closest to him that he came to change the world through inhabited hearts and not by military coup.

Manna was anything but extravagant, nothing if not simple – "thin flakes like frost on the ground." God could've rained steak and lobster on their heads for forty years if he had wanted to, instead he chose something simpler to drop from heaven. Could he have been warning us about the threat of being lured away from our simple faith in an infinitely more than adequate Savior? Might he have been saying that we will have all that we need in our Heavenly Man(na), and that we shouldn't look any further for something or someone with more glamour or glitz?

They remembered the meat they ate in Egypt "at no cost." "No cost?" Really? Had they forgotten the price they had paid as slaves? It's easy to forget the cost of slavery when the slaver keeps your stomach full but leaves your soul empty.

In our churches we have a hard time distinguishing between the spiritual and the carnal. We think we're being spiritual when we demand this blessing from God and that benefit from our church and we have a list of verses to defend our entitled form of spirituality. We quote them to God in our prayers and include them in our suggestion box notes to the pastor. We're not content with just Jesus. We want something more than manna – we demand meat!

Our demand for more than manna reveals that we obviously don't yet comprehend or appreciate what we have in Jesus! Simply Jesus – just Jesus – isn't good enough for us. To those who have ears to hear and taste buds to savor; manna is always far superior to meat! We might not have all our senses titillated or every self-indulgent desire met, but we will have tasted that the Lord is good and he's all we need. "I will be all that you need me to be when you need me to be all you need." (Elizabeth Elliott's definition of God's name, "El Shaddai.")

Spoiler Alert: In the "better place" (heaven) we'll see that he's always been all we need. In that place he'll give us even more than we need, more than we knew to ever want! Of course, he'll be the main attraction there. He's the One who makes heaven, heaven. It's the absence of Jesus that makes hell, hell. Hell would be heaven if Jesus were there. But he's not there; he's in the better place preparing our place – next to him!

Meat and the American dream

"I have come to the conclusion that for we who live in the Western world, the major challenge to the viability of Christianity is not Buddhism, with all its philosophical appeal to the Western mind, nor is it Islam, with all the challenge that it poses to Western culture. It is not the New Age that poses such a threat . . . I have come to believe that the major threat to the viability of our faith is that of consumerism. This is a far more heinous and insidious challenge to the gospel, because in so many ways it infects each and every one of us." Alan Hirsch

Manna, which tasted like “wafers made with honey” was neither repulsive nor altogether tasteless. Nevertheless, though it may sound counterintuitive to our entitled Western ears, what God provided in the wilderness wasn’t meant to be yummy. He wasn’t trying to appeal to their culinary preferences. Manna was for the wilderness, not for the Promised Land where they would be able to cultivate and feast on whatever their hearts and taste buds desired.

So, what does that imply? If manna foreshadowed Jesus, the Bread from Heaven, are we saying that we have to choke Jesus down like spinach when what we really want is chocolate cake? God forbid! We’ve “tasted” and seen that the Lord is good and even scrumptious at times. But it’s my experience that his main appeal is not to our palate but to something much deeper in us than that. In our wilderness experience his effort to titillate our senses is trumped by his work to teach us faith and humility.

*He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. . . . He gave you manna to eat in the wilderness, something your ancestors had never known, to humble and test you so that in the end it might go well with you. **Deuteronomy 8:3,16***

To those who expect the unceasing sensory stimulation from their experience with God Paul wrote:

*“Such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites.” **Romans 16:18***

*“Their god is their stomach...Their mind is set on earthly things.” **Philippians 3:19***

We confuse God’s dream with the American Dream when we believe that it’s God’s job to satisfy our lust for more tasty morsels. That sort of “faith” can be boiled down to acquiring greater material status. The thinking goes, “Since we ate meat in Egypt, it stands to our reason that we should eat at least as well, if not better!” We’ve let the American Dream creep in the back door of the Church and exist alongside, if not in place of, God’s dream.

Whatever material blessings we enjoy in America are more the result of good geography than good theology or spirituality. There are millions of people in other countries whose faith trumps ours by light years yet who suffer droughts and other freaks of nature that can decimate a people for generations. Things like Hurricane Katrina show us how badly things could turn out for us in an instant. Our prosperous nation status is much more tenuous than we realize. We mistake Christianity for capitalism and God as our personal banker when we dance around our golden-calf theology.

I become concerned when I hear more talk about *marketing* than *manna* and hire consultants to help us attract members. I suppose we reason that we can’t lure people into the Church unless we’re eating luxuriously and have something delicious to offer them when they come to the table. If we’re bored with manna, we can’t expect others to come and be satisfied with it. “We need meat if we’re going to convince people to follow our Jesus. We can’t make the sale with just Jesus!”

In addition to demanding something more appetizing, we want our spiritual diet to be tangible and explicable. The Jews named God’s provision “What is it?” admitting, that though it satisfied their every need, they had no idea what it consisted of. Many of us are not content with just Jesus because he doesn’t fit enough of our categories and we can’t adequately explain him. There’s only a certain amount of the inexplicable in our faith that we’re willing to tolerate, so we’ve all but banished the

mystery and systematized it to Wikipedian proportions. We want a faith that we can reduce to bullet points, and therefore control to our own benefit.

When the Jews finally arrived at the Promised Land the manna stopped coming. They wouldn't need it in Canaan, because manna is for the wilderness. As much as we might object to it, our life on earth is much more of a wilderness than a land of promise.* Don't get me wrong, heaven is very real, but though we "taste its powers," the place we live now isn't heaven. This is the faith place, the manna place. It's in the next place, the better place where all our desires will be realized.

When we try to convince ourselves that this earthbound place is ever going to be a mirror image of that final place where we get everything we could ever want and comprehend everything we get, we will become disillusioned. We won't need faith in the next place because our Heavenly Man(na) will stand right in front of us, revealed in all his glory. Until then we'll have to keep creeping along by faith.

**Though, on some level a case could be made for the Christian life here as a sort of Promised Land, in general, the place in which we live is no more heaven to us than the wilderness was the Promised Land to those early Jews. While for us who love God, there are exquisite aspects to this life, it's not to be compared to the next life. We're desert dwellers on a pilgrimage to the better place where gourmet three-course banquets await us.*

The unexpected consequence of our meat-lust

"The Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it.¹⁹ You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days,²⁰ but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it."

Numbers 11:19

*He rained meat down on them like dust,
birds like sand on the seashore.
He made them come down inside their camp,
all around their tents.
They ate till they were gorged—
he had given them what they craved.*

Psalms 78:27-30

*In the desert they gave in to their craving;
in the wilderness they put God to the test.
So he gave them what they asked for.*

Psalms 106:14-15

God was sustaining his people in the wilderness with supernatural "manna" when after a while they tired of it, complained about their daily diet, and whined for meat saying, "*We detest this miserable food!*" God relented and airmailed what his petulant children demanded till they were literally sick of it. "Be careful what you pray for," as I said before, "because you might get it!" They got it all right and it wasn't what they expected to get.

Centuries later, despite God's warnings, the Jews demanded a king, and God gave them one that was nothing if not inept. One of God's severest disciplinary tactics is to let us have what we want so that we'll see what we actually need and to teach us that the things we wanted don't really satisfy. God says,

in effect, “If that’s what you want, that’s what you get.” He lets us go our own way in hopes that we’ll come running back to him.

Is it possible that God has given America and its Church* what we’ve begged him for? We’ve whined and worked for more and more and more, and now that it’s ours, we’re still unhappy, unhealthy, and unhelpful. We’ve disrespected the gift of simple manna – the Man from heaven – and gorged ourselves on meat. We’re so crammed full of what we’ve craved that it pours out our nostrils! Rather than contentment, our self-indulgent expectations have sickened us, and rather than repent, we lust for more.

*I speak of America and the Church as one since, as I said above, we’ve merged the prosperity dreams of both into one self-indulged dream.

A “critical mass” of meat lovers

“Some people come to church looking for a way to make life better, to feel good about themselves, to see things in a better light. They arrange a ritual and hire a preacher to make that happen for them.” Eugene Petersen

“We’ve created a vicious cycle of endless program upgrades, staff improvements, and building campaigns to feed the consumer monster. The monster is always hungry. Pastors are burned out. Members are marginalized. The lost community gets a corrupted caricature of the Kingdom of God.” David Platt

From whence did the desert dwellers’ dissatisfaction with manna originate?

The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, “If only we had meat to eat!” Numbers 11:4

Malcontents have an almost supernatural power to breed negativity and discontentment. Their spirit of faithless fear is contagious and spreads like the flu among shallow thinking believers.

Among the newly-freed slaves the meat-lust was instigated by a group of people called, “the rabble.” In some versions they were called “the mixed multitude,” which seems to indicate they had been foreign slaves in Egypt who tagged along with the Jews on their escape from captivity. They witnessed the plagues, the undeniable sea splitting, water shooting from rocks, and the miracle morning manna. They had no choice but to believe in the God of the Jews, yet their respect for Jehovah was several wrungs below theirs.

Their faith was, at best, secondhand, so when they got tired of the morning miracle manna they whined for a diet to which they were accustomed in Egypt. Their grumbling infected the covenant people, who blindly joined in the corporate gripe. “Yeah!” they cried. “Where’s the meat? You guys are right. If we’re the people of God, we should eat better than this!” Another historical example of a small minority poisoning the minds of the majority.

These former slaves of mixed ancestry had some regard for the Jews and their religion, but had no real love for their God. They tagged along with them for the benefits that came their way by token of their proximity to the actual people of God. Their faith in their God was hand-me-down. So, when they got bored with manna they made such a stink that the Jews followed suit and moaned for meat.

As I've indicated above, it's my opinion that we're plagued with a similar spirit of entitlement in our modern Church. Where do we get it from? Where do we derive the idea that God promises his followers comfort and riches? As harsh as it may sound, I propose that one such dispensary of this entitled spirituality is a "mixed multitude" who, like the rabble in Moses' day, have attached themselves to the Church without attaching themselves to the God of the Church.

Jesus reprimanded people who only wanted earthly bread and rejected the Heavenly. These rubberneckers followed him around for the groceries and insisted on something more tangible than the spiritual. Jesus saw what was going on and thinned out the crowd who came only for lunch by insisting that they become *followers* and not just *fans*. He made it clear that he wasn't content with "friends with benefits." Like many church attenders, this mixed multitude have mixed motives in hanging around God and his people. They come around just for what they get out of it, without any intention of pledging themselves to the family or its Father.

This was no small number, significant enough to be called a "multitude," large enough to influence the rest of the nation. And unfortunately, the nation let this multitude convince them that manna was not enough. Somebody besides Moses should've spoken up. *If God decides to give us manna, who are we to lust for something more? Manna must be all we need and we must therefore choose to be grateful. You don't speak for the rest of us. We hope you'll give your heart to Jehovah the Generous, but if you're not content with his best you can leave anytime you want! But we're more than satisfied with our manna, new every morning!*

Similarly, rather than entice the half-spiritual people in our churches toward our irrepressible love and trust in God, we tend to be seduced by their toxic American Dream faith. They come to the Church for their needs to be met and their wants to be fulfilled without loving our God. They believe in him but they don't love him as he is. They're dissatisfied with just Jesus and they spread their discontentment among the rest of us whose faith was weak to begin with. Because our own relationship with God is sickly, we give into their demands for a more hedonistic faith, a comfortable church, a spirituality that provides blessings without demands. We follow their lead rather than them following ours.

I'm not suggesting that we remove the "rabble" from our churches or even that we should be selective about those we allow in. I'm saying that we should be more careful about whose voice we listen to, whose lead we follow as we carry on our pilgrimage. It's not that we shouldn't welcome people in who are spiritual only in spots, but when it comes to setting our course through the wilderness, it's the Spirit we follow and not the "mixed multitude."

When we are so thoroughly in love with God and so content with his manna, our simple inviting faith will entice even the least spiritually inclined person to follow suit. If we'll refuse to be seduced by a popular self-orbiting faith we'll be more apt to persuade them to join us in our Jesus-following, Father-loving, Spirit-obeying sojourn.

MONEY

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little." 2 Corinthians 8:13-15

Thus far, we've been talking about *manna* and *meat*. I've been saying that *manna* represents the all-sufficient *Bread from Heaven, Jesus*; and in contrast, *meat* is what we demand from God when Jesus isn't enough for us. But where does *money* fit into this picture? Well, Paul, who taught that the Old Testament narrative was relevant to New Testament believers (1 Corinthians 10:1-11), proposed in a subsequent letter to the same church a startling application to the manna story.

In the process of challenging the Corinthians to pony up to give aid the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8-9), Paul borrowed a piece of the manna metaphor to teach them about the spirit of generosity and egalitarianism in the Church. This time he associated manna to *money*. While Jesus identified himself as the Heavenly Man(na) with which we should be abundantly satisfied, Paul leveraged the imagery to show how we should relate to our material resources and demonstrate a radical liberality.

"Just as God had insisted on equal portions of manna for all his people in the wilderness, so now the Corinthians should give "so that there may be equality" in the body of Christ." Ron Sider

We might say that money is as much a gift from God to us as manna was to the Jews in the wilderness. Of course, we exchange work for the money we receive, but we know that even the *availability* of the work as well as our *ability* to perform it is a gift. Even though some in Moses' day were more capable of manna gathering than others, it was to be distributed equitably so that no one received too much or too little for their needs (Exodus 16:17-18). Then, based on the manna story, Paul suggested that some people are more able "manna gatherers" than others, that is, better at making money than some, and went out on a limb to imply that, as followers of Jesus, we're obligated to share the resources we have with others endowed with less ability or fewer opportunities. He urges those who are wealthier to share with those who, for whatever reason, are less endowed.*

In the case of manna, if anyone hoarded what they collected, it spoiled. Moses told them to consume each day's portion instead of making any attempt at saving it up and amassing more than their permitted allotment. But when they defied the mandate and stuffed some in a cabinet for the next day, it became rancid and full of maggots. In *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* Timothy Keller says, "Paul interprets this as an abiding principle for how we are to deal with God's material provision for us and share it equitably. . . . Money that is hoarded for oneself rots the soul." Ouch!

Likewise, Paul warned Timothy that some people "think that godliness is a means to financial gain." Don't get me started on the gold-necklaced preachers who fly their personal jets between their crusades (an ill-advised term if ever there was one!) and their lavish estates! There's nothing new under the sun so Paul warned his protégé:

⁶ But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷ For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸ But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹ Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸ Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. ¹⁹ In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. **1 Timothy 6**

The more content we are with “just Jesus” the less apt we’ll be to covet wealth. When we see that the Man(na) from Heaven is more than enough – way more! – we tend to clamor less for *meat or money*. There’s an old Amish maxim: “To desire to be rich is to desire to have more than what we need to be content.” With food and clothing we *can and should be* content.

“Some gathered much, some little... he who gathered much did not have too much and he who gathered little did not have too little.” Exodus 16:17

The distribution of manna was supernaturally supervised in one way or another. Either, by the time they got to their tent with their basketful no one had more than anyone else or they brought it all to a distribution center and it was doled out equally. If someone gathered more and another less, God saw to it that, on one hand, no one starved and, on the other, no one got manna-rich. As desert dwellers theirs was to be an egalitarian society. To the early church, Paul indicated that the principle of equitability still stands, and that, under the Lord’s advisement we should distribute our wealth in an equitable way.

He challenged the Corinthian Christians to a justice-based distribution of wealth in the spirit of generosity. God had supernaturally intervened to assure equal portions for the Jews in the wilderness, and Paul – aware that God loves “cheerful givers” – advised the saints to follow a similar policy out of their own free will. His was no top-down command as though advocating any sort of involuntary socialistic Christianity, but “advice about what was best for them in this matter.” 2 Corinthians 8:10

Tangentially, though manna stopped coming when they arrived at the Promised Land, the lessons from God regarding egalitarianism didn’t. Mosaic legislation was designed to keep the ordinary disparities between the wealthy and the poor from becoming extreme. His laws regarding lending to the poor without interest, leaving some of the fruit of their harvest for the needy to glean, and providing for the fatherless, widows, and immigrants are all indicative of his concern for those among them who were less fortunate.

Keller wrote, “*God’s concern for the poor is so strong that he gave Israel a host of laws that, if practiced, would have virtually eliminated any permanent underclass. . . . If this is true of God, we who believe in him must always find some way of expressing it our own practices, even if believers now live in a new stage in the history of God’s redemption.*”

Going back to the Jews’ demand for “meat,” I wonder if we could take the comparison between manna and money another step to make the point that a just distribution of wealth requires that each of us,

whether rich or poor, must not demand “meat” in our manna world. In other words, if we are receiving our regular allotment of manna (Jesus called it “daily bread”), we ought to be content and therefore refuse to covet more than that. Work hard on our jobs? Of course. Take a promotion when it’s offered to us? Sure, unless it gets in the way of some kingdom value, i.e. family obligations, ministry calling, personal integrity, or doing justly in the world. But those who “want to get rich” and are “eager for money” tend to crave more and more while the spirit of generosity is squelched. When preoccupied with a lust for *meat* we’re not as likely to share our *manna* with those who have less.

As I said previously, there’s a “mixed multitude” in the Church today, who not only want more than manna, but they feel entitled to *more and more manna*. They’ve confused God’s dream with the American Dream and seduced a segment of the Western Church to deem the accumulation of manna / money as an evidence of superior spirituality. They misleadingly preach that personal prosperity is an indicator of how much faith one has, and that God’s approval is evidently on the economically successful. Theirs is a vending machine god wherein we insert our change and expect something back! It’s a spirituality that pays in material wealth. Not only is this untrue, it’s unhealthy and toxic.

Through love and generosity we have the opportunity to starve the mammon spirit to death in our Church, when instead we feed it by supersizing everything, building mansions for God, and promising prosperity to the faithful.

Someone pointed out that there are two crises in the world: *dehumanizing poverty and dehumanizing consumerism*, and that the Church is responsible to devise and caretake solutions to both. In *Oriented To Faith* Tim Otto wrote, “*One of the most devious and dangerous aspects of a consumer economy is that it teaches us to see ourselves as bundles of unmet needs—needs that must be satisfied by consuming products, services, and people. . . . We go through life thinking that what we really need is a newer handheld gadget, an updated kitchen, or a faster car. To say nothing of thinking we need new and improved people—a different spouse, different children, different friends.*”

Paul’s idea was entirely different from that of entitled money mongers of his day (and ours). By proposing an equitable consumption of manna / money he debunked the theology which promotes an expectation of prosperity through faith. He suggests a society whereby some may gather more and others less, but those with more are obliged to help those with less. This is in direct contrast to the present reality that 80 people in the world now own 99% of the world’s wealth. I wouldn’t have a problem with that if it weren’t true that almost half the world (3 billion people) were “living” on less than \$2 a day and if children weren’t dying of poverty related causes at the rate of 30,000 a day – 210,000 a week, almost 11 million each year!

They say that my city of San Francisco has the most extreme gap between rich and poor of any city in America. The well-off live in a monetary universe that the poorest of the City’s citizens can only read about – that is, if they can afford a newspaper! There’s nothing wrong with possessing billions, but there is something wrong with keeping it for yourself and not sharing it somehow, somewhere, and with someone(s). Again, I’m not advocating socialism, but a biblical voluntary spirit of generosity among the upper class toward the under class.

“Jesus taught that a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is seriously wrong with one’s spiritual compass, the heart. . . . If you have been assigned the goods of this world by God and you don’t share them with others, it isn’t just stinginess, it is injustice. . . . People changed by grace should go, as it were, on a permanent fast. Self-indulgence and materialism should be given up and replaced by a sacrificial lifestyle of giving to those in need.” **Tim Keller**

I appreciate the old adage to “love people and use money, and not the other way around.” Since I had nothing to do with it, I don’t apologize for being born in privilege. What I do apologize for is my lack of understanding and concern to do precious little with that privilege to help those who weren’t as fortunate as me. What little I can do with the manna / money I’ve gathered may be just a drop in the ocean, but, as Mother Teresa said, “If that drop was not in the ocean, I think the ocean would be less.”

*I’m aware of the challenge of sorting out the difference between a “hand out” versus a “hand up,” i.e. providing relief to people who need rehabilitation and/or development. I recommend a great book on the subject, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor* by Steve Corbett. Setting aside those valid concerns for the moment, my point is to advocate a generous and egalitarian spirit required of all Christians at all times with all people.

Wrapping it up

I said way back in the beginning that I would be making an appeal for a more Christ-centered, less entitled, and generous sort of Christianity. I've proposed that many Christians have settled for a shallow and self-absorbed brand of spirituality and as a result are bored of their diet of "simple manna" and therefore demand from God more than he promises (at least in this world). As harsh as it sounds, my take is that many Christians are overfed, underchallenged, and spiritually sick.

To my mind, the "manna" story not only serves to point this out, it offers us a way out of this unhealthy cycle. The solution is to "eat the flesh" of the Man from Heaven (John 6), to ingest him, to take him inside so he can live his supernatural life in and through us. If our Christianity is lacking it's most likely because it doesn't have enough Jesus in it. We mustn't memorialize what we possessed of him yesterday. Yesterday's manna will not do for today, nor today's for tomorrow. A regular routine of eating followed by sleeping with no working in between dooms us to spiritual obesity. Spiritual vitality requires a daily intake of the Person of Jesus and then living each day in the nourishment he gives to our spirit.

One inevitable consequence of a meager diet of the Heavenly Man(na) is a lust for more than mere manna – that is, a demand for "meat." As the Jews were misled by the spotty spirituality of the "mixed multitude" into feeling entitled to something "more" than manna, so there is a "critical mass" associated with the Church who expect something more satisfying than Jesus. Their voice is deceptively inspiring and mustn't be trusted or followed.

"More satisfying than Jesus," that doesn't easily roll off the tongue. It's actually painful to say that there's a person more wonderful than God. It's like talking about a place better than heaven! He said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry again." To paraphrase, "If you really feed on me you won't have any room left for meat or anything else."

Lastly, I talked about when we revel in the life he lives in us and life we have in him we'll be less apt to lust for material riches and to hoard those riches for ourselves. When our soul is satiated and satisfied with Living Bread we find ourselves anxious to share our material and spiritual resources with those who lack them.

If we're saturated and satisfied with Jesus our intuitive response is to want everyone he loves to be as full as we are – their stomachs and spirits both. Manna-full people are generous people.