

Reading: [Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time | USCCB](#)

He went home after that Christmas eve mass, disillusioned that the candle neither flickered, blew out, or sparked back on by a miraculous act of God despite his honest request, a desperate, honest, request. Yet, he held on, he refused to let go of the possibility that God did exist... that those experiences he had as a teen were real and not a product of his imagination... so, he figured he would give it one last shot.

As he pondered why this doubt was overpowering, he concluded that maybe this feeling of God's distance was because he was so busy with work and college that he was no longer *putting in the work* in his spiritual life. Maybe he just wasn't doing enough. It made sense, so he came up with a great idea, a proposal with God: for the next months he would continue to focus on school and work and put God aside, but at the start of Lent which was just a few months away, he would go all in... he would start praying and fasting religiously. Besides, lent was a special holy season! Jesus went to the desert for forty days where he prayed and fasted, and great things happened. The Israelites where in the desert for forty years, they prayed and fasted, and great things happened... surely God would do something for him in this desert he was going though. It was a brilliant plan, it made sense.

Time went by and before he knew it Ash Wednesday was just a day away. That night he set his alarm an hour earlier. The plan was to get up and pray for an hour every morning, followed by an eight hour fast, and abstaining from all food except water and bread the rest of the day. He would do this every day for forty days. He was determined and goes to bed feeling motivated, thinking “*surely, God can’t refuse all this hard work!*”

The alarm goes off at that ungodly early hour, and every ounce of motivation he held just a few hours before seemed non-existent. It didn’t take long before he hit snooze, time and time again... until he had no choice but to get up or he would be late for class. So much for praying in the morning... well he could at least fast. As he drove to class, at a distance he sees a beautiful, glorious, M shaped golden arch. He felt unusually hungry and was overwhelmed with the desire for a McMuffin, but no, it was Ash Wednesday: fasting and no meat!

Those arches grew larger and came closer faster than he could mentally reject the idea, and just as he was about to pass them, he slammed on the break and pulls in. Feeling the full weight of regret as he whipped the oily fingers on the car seat fabric, but not wanting to be fully discouraged, he says to himself: *Well, today was*

a failure... but its only day one... there are 39 more days... tomorrow will be different! To be continued...

Last week we focused on the difficulty with prayer when God doesn't seem to give us what we want, and we are left wanting more. We saw how when it comes to God, this makes us susceptible to search for God in other places, to wonder around like lost sheep. But moved with compassion, Jesus gives in abundance so that we can recognize that Jesus is enough. Sounds good and all, but coming to this realization is not so easy, there are other habits and ways of thinking that are obstacles in this relationship with God.

Today we are confronted with one of those obstacles: *the thought that we need to work for God's favor.*

It is so logical and natural to think in terms of work and results. Since we are children, we are taught to work hard to accomplish our dreams, in everything we do....

If you want to be financially secured, do good in school, get a good job, be smart about your spending, work hard and you will get a return. If you want a successful marriage, put in the work... have good communication, spend time together, be willing to have difficult conversations, resolving conflict when it can

be resolved and find a compromise when it can't be resolved. A relationship takes work. If you want a chiseled body, you need to be disciplined, eat the right food, get the right sleep, exercise a certain way, and you get results. In everything we do, we can achieve results by doing the work... that is how we make things happen, nothing in life is free.

So logically, since this is our daily experience, then our relationship with God should be the same... *If I want to be close to God, (or, if I want God to be close to me), then I need to put in the work... I need to pray more, go to church more, fast more, do the things that are pleasing to God and sin less... If I do all the right spiritual things, the logically the outcome should be that God will be closer to me... why wouldn't he if I put in the work? That is how we get results.*

This is where Jesus corrects us... because when it comes to God, that relationship is in completely different terms.

Last week we saw that people approached Jesus wanting to see signs and miracles, but instead, Jesus feeds them. This was strange to them because not only was it unexpected and unsolicited, but they were fed ***without having to work*** for it... they didn't have to sow the seeds, harvest the grain, make flour, knead the

dough and bake the bread... they didn't have to go fishing... it was all provided for them...

They liked that... who doesn't like a free meal? (By the way, I am now accepting invitations to dinner at your homes... my only dietary restriction is minimal dairy, but other than that, everything is fair game... and just in case you were wondering, I enjoy a nice stake with a gin and tonic. Just throwing that out there...)

Anyway, so, the people liked what Jesus gave them, and now they wanted more free food because well, they got hungry again... so they return to Jesus. "Hey we are back... do that thing again... give us more."

Now, they were on the right track, they were now coming to Jesus to be feed, no longer to see him do signs and miracles, but they still lacked the understanding of who Jesus was and what Jesus was really offering them. For them the spiritual life was satisfied the same way a physical need is satisfied... they had to work for it. So, Jesus engages them in a little thinking exercise: he tells them that manual labor produces common bread, but a different kind of work is needed for the bread that Jesus offered.

This was a difficult concept for them to understand... because like us they were so used to thinking in terms of putting in the work to produce results... so they respond: *well, we have commandments, they are work; we do them and God blesses us. Our ancestors followed the commandments and God blessed them with Mana, so tell us, Jesus... what do we need do to get whatever it is you are offering?*

Jesus clarifies: the bread your ancestors received was not something they themselves harvested or worked for, it came from God directly... in the same way, if you want the bread I am offering, then “whoever **beliefs** in me will never hunger or thirst...” Here, Jesus reinterprets our concept of work to something different: faith, belief, meaning, a relationship with God it’s not something we do, it is something we receive and accept.

Why is this an important distinction? Well, the works we do on earth produces fruits that will satisfy our immediate needs, but these needs are ongoing, which is why we need be constantly working... constantly eating, constantly going to work, constantly working out, constantly **doing things** to help keep us satisfied... but faith and belief satisfies a different need, one that is deeper, permanent... and unless a person comes to the assertion that Jesus is enough, then just like physical hunger

they will never feel fully satisfied... never feel like they are praying enough, fasting enough, reading scripture enough...

I mean, how many of you feel like you pray enough? Most of us don't... how many go through lent with perfect fasting and abstinence? If we analyze how well we do our spiritual and religious duties... we realize we are pretty mediocre and that can lead us to the conclusion that we are either not doing enough and are tempted to just give up... or, we are doing all the right things and yet, God doesn't seem to care... That is why Jesus says: it's not about you doing the work... it's about faith, believe in me. What does that mean, exactly? Sounds abstract. We'll have to wait for Jesus to expand on it next week.

That first day of lent concluded a complete failure. That night I set my alarm once again an hour early. I was determined that for the next 39 days, I would put in the work to make it happen, to make God present in my life and I would feel satisfied. Once again in the morning I did not have the strength or desire to get up and pray, to do the work... can't even remember if I even attempted to fast.

Day after day went by and nothing... every attempt at praying and fasting only seemed to make things worse... it only affirmed what I was already suspecting, the reason the candle never flickered that Christmas eve... God is not

real... because if God was really that loving Father that provided for his children, then why wasn't he providing for me when I was honestly trying to do all the right things...? No, "god" is not in the desert, there is no bread, no manna for me here...

To be continued...

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