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Pastor Dr. João Filson Soren

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**“GIVE YE THEM TO EAT”**

A Sermon by  
The Reverend João Filson Soren, *Official orator*  
*on*  
Matthew 14:13-21

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As our Lord begins the third year of His earthly ministry, he was withdrawn to the outlying districts around the province of Galilee. The hostility of the Jewish rulers, the fanaticism of the followers in Galilee, and the dangerous jealousy of Herod the Tetrarch, who had cold bloodedly murdered John the Baptist, led Jesus to adopt the strategy of carefully avoiding the more populous centres, while he tarried in the distant areas, concentrating on the special training of the twelve, and ministering to the people who lived in the surrounding hills and smaller villages of Galilee. And the people would flock around Him as sheep without a shepherd, and they would listen to His teachings, and would bring Him their sick that He might heal them. *“He gave himself to the common people of Galilee, and they in turn gave him their love and admiration”*. They did not hate Him like the Pharisees and the Herodians, neither did they try to eliminate Him, as did the scribes and the rulers of the land. They did not call Him a glutton and a wine bibber. They did not try to trap Him into saying things, which might incriminate Him. They did not accuse Him of having partnership with the devil.

They believed Him to be a prophet. Those provincial Galileans were not as blind as the unworthy rulers and religious leaders. They took Him to be anointed from God, and compared Him with the very greatest figures in the History of Israel. Many even thought that He might be one of the great prophets, such as Isaiah or Elijah, who had risen from the dead.

St. Paul had the most disconcerting experience of his entire ministry in the capital of Greco-Roman culture and intellectualism. The greatest preacher of all time met with his greatest failure on Mar's Hill. Harnack, the German historian, he says that *“From the outset the church at Athens was small, and small it remained, for in this city of philosophers Christianity could find little room. And his true that there was no great church in Athens until at least three centuries had gone by.”*

Jesus himself marvelled at the unbelief of the urban sophisticated populations, and right there in Galilee vented his astonishment as He spoke thus: *“I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to babes”*.

St. Matthew gives the reason for this strategic withdrawal of Jesus to the more distant areas of the province. He had heard of how the cruel hatred of the lascivious Herodias had prevailed upon Herod the Tetrarch to have John the Baptist decapitated in prison and his head brought to the feast hall upon a platter. He knew also that the sensual and superstitious princeling suspected Jesus of being the Baptist, who had risen from the grave. Herod was determined to find Jesus and see for himself. As Jesus knew fully well that no good could come from such an encounter, he decided upon avoiding a meeting with Herod and contact with his henchmen. Therefore he gathered his disciples, sailed to the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, and landed on the grassy plain of Bethsaida.

Soon, however, the people in that region found him, and a large multitude began to gather about him from every quarter, bringing along their sick that He might heal them.

The compassionate heart of Jesus was moved with pity as he looked upon those suffering human beings, and he taught unto them out of his perfect love and kindness. The shepherd consciousness was aroused within Him as he gazed upon the wayward, restless, hopeless multitude with their afflicted bodies and souls. The hours passed away as he tarried with the people, curing their illnesses, teaching them the truth from God, and comforting their souls with His blessed presence. So as evening came on, and the Master still continued to minister to the people, His disciples intervened and asked him to dismiss the multitude, that they might go into the surrounding villages and buy food.

It pained the Master, however, to dismiss the people, knowing as He did, that no food would be available at that late hour in the nearby villages. So Jesus decides that the multitude will not be dismissed unfed. He tells them to sit down on the grass, and then he wrought the stupendous miracle of feeding five thousand men besides women and children.

Now this miracle is a perfect object lesson to all who would know what Jesus Christ really means to mankind, and how those who call themselves His disciples should be engaged in spreading the light of His name and His love in this darkened and desolate world of suffering and of sin.

*“Therefore Jesus said unto them,  
They need not depart; give ye them to eat”.*

## I

This quite surprising command of our Lord given to His disciples, allows a true glimpse of what Christianity really is and what it actually means to mankind.

Let us be reminded that Christ’s miracles are not mere marvels and wonders, but signs which identify Him, and practical illustrations or object lesson which teach the great truths of His Gospel. Thus, as we read about His miraculous feeding of the multitude, we can more readily and clearly understand the meaning of His words, as on the following day He spoke to the same multitude saying:

*“I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall  
never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst”.*

As Jesus looked upon the throngs that had gathered about Him with their burdens of illness and pain, His searching eyes sought out the famished souls, the impoverished and ruined inner man. Even though He ministered to their bodily aliments, He was ever mindful of the deep-rooted causes of their many woes. Once, as a lame man was carried into His presence, Jesus turned to him and spoke as if He had not seen the man’s lameness saying:

*“Son, be of good cheer;  
thy sins be forgiven thee”.*

Jesus postponed the healing of his physical malady, that He might first cure the basic, moral and constitutional disease of the inner man. Jesus Christ made it very clear that, at the bottom of all human problems, sufferings and failures, there is to be found the universal moral tragedy of sin; that black plague of the soul for which there is only one antibiotic, even the blood of the Lamb of God, *“which take the away the sin of the world”.*

The Son of God came to this world as Heaven’s remedy to restore those who are dead in sin and trespasses. Listen to His own words:

*“I am the living bread which came down from heaven.  
If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever”.*

Man's most urgent need today is to relieve the pangs of spiritual hunger with this Living Bread. Let us not be deceived by the thought that education and civilization can produce in man such a high degree of psychological maturity and balance, that the so things and comforts of faith will become unnecessary and obsolete. The reverse of this idea seems to be true. Civilization is so far from solving man's fundamental problems that Alexis Carrel has remarked that, *"in building the structure of civilization, we seem to have not taken into consideration the principal and primary factor which is man himself"*. The demands of modern civilization, with all its strains and tensions, instead of offering spiritual nourishment and reinforcement, it rather draws and drains from human beings what spiritual reserves they might still retain.

Unfortunately something similar to this has happened in man's religious experience, because the spiritual tragedy of our day is religious disillusionment. Millions upon millions in Latin America are awakening to the fact that the religion in which they have been reared and taught, is only resonant emptiness, and a rather useless accumulation of myths and traditions. This explains the receptiveness of the Latin American populations to materialistic ideologies, which allege that religion is opium, follows in the wake of religious disillusionment; it sprouts wherever the church fails. A religion that falls short of nourishing man's spiritual constitution through an actual and personal experience with God through Jesus Christ the Living Bread, remains open to the attack which points to religion as opium.

Never human language has spoken so truly in behalf of man's universal and poignant need, as the Psalmist, when he expresses thus his yearning for God:

*"As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God"*.

St. Augustine lived in sinful degradation until he found the Living Bread, and rested his anguished heart in the Shepherd's fold. Then he could say out of a personal experience that *"man was created for God, and only in God does he find rest and satisfaction for his weary soul"*.

One of Brazil's past presidents died last March, at a very old age, just as he was beginning a new term in the Federal House of Representatives. He was one of my Country's outstanding statesmen. Just a few hours before he passed on into eternity, he wrote these words: *"God is the end for which man exists, and for which we should try to live. I have lived, however, more for my country, having forgotten God. I fear that I shall not be able to redeem myself of this shortcoming in the little time I still have left"*. Unless man feeds his soul with the Living Bread, no matter what rights he may reach in the eyes of men, no matter what successes he may attain, he is bound to realize some day, that it does not profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his immortal soul. He will inevitably feel himself impoverished and frustrated. If frustration in comparatively secondary and irrelevant matters can bring about such startling consequences in one's personality, is it any wonder that the basic frustration of godlessness has wrought such havoc with the souls and lives of men? The universal state of human restlessness, revolt and confusion points to a frustrated, inhibited and maladjusted human nature, whose primary and essential needs and powers remain unattended, undeveloped, and distorted by the crushing pressure of practical and philosophical materialism.

The suggestion which the disciples offered to Jesus, that he dismiss the multitude so they might go and buy food in the nearby villages, reminds us for the inadequacy of the sources to which man will turn in times of crises.

As we look out upon this world of ours, we cannot but feel our hearts tightening within us, as we see men building up their messianic hopes upon such frail and fallacious foundations. They turn in thousands and by the millions to the villages of social orders and ideologies; they turn to villages of culture and philosophy in the hope of finding the answer to humanity's present day problems; they attempt to buy the living bread in the villages of cults and ethnic religions; they enter the villages of atheism and agnosticism from whence they must eventually return empty-hearted and depressed by failure and disappointment. History, both ancient and modern, teaches beyond any shadow of doubt, that the things that oppose God's word and truth sooner or later reveal their weakness. Men discover by and by that there is no hope in them. Must we send the multitudes away to the villages of spiritual destitution away to the villages of spiritual destitution and hopelessness? Our Master tells us: *"Give ye them to eat"*.

The sense of failure weighs heavily on the mind of this generation. There is a prevailing consciousness that something is radically wrong in the make-up of this twentieth century world of ours. Civilization has turned out to be a "Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde" affair. The very powers that build up things are potentially the tools of destruction and death. One is ever wondering when and where the next explosion will occur. The multitudes and the nations held in suspense and expectancy are, as never before, in a receptive mood, which makes of this generation the day of opportunity for the promotion and spreading of Christ's Kingdom on earth. What a day is this for the Gospel! The road is wide open for a mighty spiritual crusade reaching far throughout the nations of the world. The time is here for the followers of Jesus Christ to hearken to His divine command and let loose the floods of God's redeeming love upon a lost world.

It was at a crucial time that our Lord commanded His disciples to feed the multitude. But the religion of Jesus Christ was born out of the universal crisis of sin. It adequately fits man to meet all crises. It is God's answer of love and power to the time and eternity. It proves itself as the power of God unto salvation, in that it meets the needs of men in times of trials, hardships and adversities.

I shall never forget that cold morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. of February of 1945. The Brazilian infantry that served in Italy with the American Fifth Army had just fought its bloodiest battle in the foothills of the Italian Apennine Mountains, where other battles had previously been fought before the heavy snows of that severe winter had begun to fall. As Chaplain of the Brazilian Division, I set out to explore the area searching for the bodies of soldiers who had fallen in battle and had remained buried under the snow in no-man's-land during the winter months. I eventually came upon the body of a young Sargent who had grown up in the Sunday school of the First Baptist Church in Rio de Janeiro. The ice and snow were just beginning to thaw, so the body of that soldier who had disappeared in combat two months earlier, was perfectly preserved. He had used up all his ammunition and it appeared that, as he was about to charge in the final assault upon his objective, an enemy missile had pierced his chest. He did not die immediately, however. He had time to reach into his pocket and take a New Testament and Psalms, which the Chaplain had given him, and had opened it at the Shepherd Psalm. He had evidently read, as his life slowly ebbed away: *"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want"*. His head had then fallen forward, and the flowing blood had glued the pages to his frozen face. In that trying and crucial moment the dying soldier had turned to Him who never fails. He might have sung with Isaac Watts:

*"I can do all things, of can bear  
All sufferings, if my Lord be there:  
Sweet pleasures mingle with the pains,  
While He my sinking head sustains.*

*I glory in infirmity,  
That Christ's power may rest on me;  
When I'm weak, then I'm strong,  
Grace is my shield, and Christ my song!"*

## II

The trenchant command of our Lord to His disciples contains a very permanent and fundamental teaching as to the means and methods where by Christianity must attain its objectives and fulfil its purposes in this world.

One is usually at liberty to select one's own methods of performing a given task, according to personal temperament and preference. The choice of methods, however, must take into account the nature of the task one has set oneself to. Each kind of work requires a certain type of method and procedure. Surely no one would expect a cabinetmaker and an accountant to employ the same methods of work in their respective fields. Sometimes men will elect to perform a given task with methods, which are wholly inadequate. Then failure is inevitable. The Bible teaches about the folly of choosing inadequate methods and applying the wrong principles when one wishes to attain certain ends. There was a time, the Bible tells us, when men decided that they would reach up to heaven by a new and different way.

They considered the old orthodox method of reaching the heavenly highs as out-dated and obsolete. So they decided to build themselves a tower that would lift them up as high as heaven. The failure and the confusion of the tower of Babel is a warning against the error of employing unworthy and inadequate methods.

Now it appears that there have been some very serious mistakes made along this line all through the History of the Church. Very early in the course of Christianity, the idea occurred to a Roman Emperor that the religion of Jesus Christ lacked the vitality and power and dynamic to survive and supplant the pagan religion of his Empire. He thought that it would die of suffocation, if it were to employ those elementary methods, which Paul the Apostle had used to overrun the gentile nations with the preaching of Christ crucified for the redemption of all mankind. Constantine, the Emperor, decided, therefore, to reinforce Christianity with temporal, that is, political, military and governmental prestige and support. So he passed decrees making the Christian religion the official religion of his Empire. Any opposition or refusal in religious and theological matters brought about political and legal implications and consequences. This wrong method of propagating the faith wrought a tragic distortion in historical Christianity, which has unfortunately contributed oftentimes to put the religion of Jesus Christ in very bad repute.

As a result of this regretful trend, history registers a sequence of very unhappy episodes. You know about the Crusades; those medieval, so called holy wars, sponsored and led by the leaders of a distorted and contradictory type of Christianity. You have read about the so called holy Inquisition; that counter-reformation movement that presents us with a cruel and corrupted form of Christianity whose power came not from God, but from tyrannical governments, which the very clergy held under abominable domination. Notwithstanding the many tragic and blood smeared proofs in history of the inadequacy of Church and State union, this method and policy of promoting the ends of the Christian Religion, continues to produce its inevitable deleterious results to this very day.

Very recently one of the South American republics found itself on the very brink of national disaster, as a result of unrest and dissatisfaction growing out of the Church and State union policy. One cannot expect good fruit from such a tree. No other single factor has contributed more toward the suppression of religious liberty in the western world than the unnatural policy of Church and State union. There certainly is not the least vestige or taint of such an idea or method of promoting the Kingdom of our Lord in the words of Jesus, as He spoke to His disciples saying: "Give ye them to eat".

But then there are those who believe that the salvation of this world through the Gospel of Jesus Christ is simply a matter of time.

There are people, Christian people, who adhere to a superstitious belief that time is a universal panacea for all human problems and difficulties. According to this messianic fatalism of time, the very Kingdom of God will come and expand on earth in its own due time. One allowed not try too hard to force events, but should passively and patiently await their occurrence. Such trend of thought, in regard to the salvation of mankind, is often associated with that hard shell pre-determinism, which for generations inhibited missionary endeavour.

As Jesus looked upon the weary and hungry multitude, He did not tell His disciples to sit and wait until time and Providence eventually improved matters. He told them to act. The time was at hand when they should take matters into their own hands and proceed at once to feed the multitude.

Now it appears that, to a certain extent, too many Christians today are counting on time, and time is running out on us. There is no scriptural or historical basis to substantiate the belief that this world of sin will gradually and naturally, of its own accord, drift toward Christ. The weight of evidence points in the opposite direction. Never before in the history of mankind there were such formidable powers engaged in opposing the Name, which is above every other name. There were never before so many millions and millions living in the world without the light and life eternal. The human race grows faster than our pace in feeding the multitudes with the Living Bread.

One might discern the undertones of urgency as Jesus spoke to the disciples, "Give ye them to eat". Yea, right there and then, as the need required them to do. Not at a later hour, not eventually, but immediately. They were facing a situation, which required immediate action on their part. Fellow Baptists from many lands, must I tell you that the world is in a crisis today? Must we not feel the urgency to act and preach and witness for Christ? Isn't that what He would have us do while it is a till day?

There was a very definite period of time for those disciples yonder in Galilee to get into action and feed the multitude. Darkness would be coming on, when it would no longer be possible to provide for those thousands who were without bread. Should the disciples hesitate, should they procrastinate when service was urgent, then there would be no way and no hope for those suffering throngs. Not one single person would be benefited if the disciples bid their time and waited passively for something extraordinary to happen. Something extraordinary did happen, however, when they went into action.

Have not Christ's disciples today been waiting too long to feed the multitudes? Will we let the definite period of time we have on hand pass away without rendering our service to this generation? In my own Country Baptists are becoming increasingly aware of the fact the unless we mobilize all available personal and spiritual resources and reserves in order to win the millions of Brazil for Christ, the time will come, if we just let time pass away, when the opportunities we have today, will no longer exist. There, as in many other South American countries, the ideologies of crass materialism and the domineering intolerance of the Roman clergy, vie with each other in the persistent effort to suppress religious liberty. Must we wait until the doors are closed? Doors have been closed in many lands within the last decade. Must we lose ground in the battle against the powers of sin and of darkness as we wait instead of going about our supreme task of feeding the multitudes?

Now will you listen again to the command of our Lord and Master: "Give ye them to eat". He speaks to all the disciples within hearing range. There are no exceptions. The task was not given to a handful of leaders amongst the twelve; not to a presiding elder, or executive committee, or convention beard of missions. As we allow the resonance of those words spoken by Jesus away in Galilee to reach our minds and hearts, we cannot but feel that our Master speaks to each one of us today, even has He has ever spoken to His disciples in all generations and in every land, that they go forth and shine, and witness, and feed the those who are spiritually destitute and dying. This is truly the life task of every disciples of Jesus Christ.

Baptists are, as a rule, very zealous of their rights and privileges both in matters of church and denominational polity. They are ever vigilant that no personal or institutional encroachment shall imperil Baptist democracy and personal competency. It seems however that the individualism of Christian service has not kept pace with the concept of Christian individualism in salvation and in administration. We are not prone to surrender our personal prerogatives as Christians to the totalitarian currents, which exalt the group, the masses, the institutions and the organizations at the cost of individual values and dignities. But, where we would never abdicate of our democratic rights and privileges in matters spiritual and administrative, we often do relegate and practically annul the democracy of Christian labour. As we forget our privileges and personal responsibilities in the supreme service of our Lord, as His disciples, we drift gradually to an accommodation which allows a faithful minority to bear the brunt of the battle, as large numbers remain only a spectators or inactive rooters in the grandstands.

It is imperative that Christians today understand that the extension of Christ's Kingdom on earth, as the Gospel of hope and salvation, is the personal task and responsibility of every follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let not one of us shirk the duty; let no one excuse himself from service by alleging that one has been officially appointed or specifically elected for service by the church, board or convention, because the appointment has been made by Jesus Christ himself. He commissions His disciples as servants saying unto them:

*"Ye are the light of the world".*

*"As ye go, preach, saying, The Kingdom of heaven is at hand".*

*"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you,  
That ye should go and bring forth fruit..."*

*"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:  
And ye shall witness unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea,  
and in Samaria, and into the uttermost part of the earth".*

*"They need not depart; give ye them to eat".*

Would to God that the followers of Jesus Christ in this day might have the same vision of those Christ-led disciples of old. Their daily contact with Jesus had given them a new understanding of things and a new perspective of suffering humanity. The compassion and kindness of the Master had softened those human hearts, and made them sensitive and compassionate as they looked out upon the burdened and afflicted multitude. They could not remain indifferent to what was happening. There were the thousands in a deserted area, with nothing to eat, and evening was coming on. They felt that they should do something. Do we feel that we should do something when millions and millions in our generation are perishing without the light of salvation? Do we actually concern ourselves to the point of getting down to the task of feeding the hopeless multitudes?

William E. Gladstone was one of the greatest statesmen of modern times. Great Britain has every reason to be proud of having had such a noble character more than once at the helm of the Empire. One of Gladstone's biographers has this to say about him: *"In Gladstone's lifetime he was the one statesman to whom oppressed peoples turned in hope"*.

My friends, there still is one to whom the oppressed peoples of the earth may turn in hope!

It is imperative that the Christian view of the present day world be realistic enough to pierce the film of external and superficial appearance, which hides the true and tragic anguish of this desperate, sin laden human race without hope and without God in the world. One has not beheld the true picture of mankind until one's vision has been sufficiently clarified by the light of Jesus Christ. Then, and only then, will our hearts be moved by the plight of lost immortal souls and blighted human live. Unless we have a genuine and profound concern for the soul starved multitudes, we might justly hesitate to consider ourselves truly disciples in the likeness of our Master.

One of the most influential Baptist ministers in Brazil, was, until some years ago, a Catholic priest in the State of São Paulo. Some time back, as he was telling of his conversion, and of how the saving grace of Jesus made him cast off the Roman priestly garb, and become a preacher of the true Gospel, he made this unforgettable statement: *"The same Jesus who removed from my soul the crushing burden of sin, placed upon my heart the burden of lost souls"*.

And now, in closing, I would have you listen again to our Lord's command: "Give ye them to eat".

Can't you see the wonder and amazement on the faces of those disciples of old? Did ever Jesus utter a more unexpected command? How could those disciples possibly feed the vast throng gathered on the plain of Bethsaida? Humanity speaking, the task was certainly beyond them. The odds were overwhelmingly against their doing what Jesus commanded them to do. But, my friends, humanly speaking, the odds are always against the followers of Jesus Christ as they strive to do His will. Let us be reminded, however, that when our Lord commands then He also leads, and when He assigns the task He also confers the powers, and when He commissions His servants He also provides the means.

"Give ye them to eat". Herein is the divine plan for feeding the multitudes in all generations: that the disciples of Jesus Christ go forth and distribute that which they have received from the blessed Saviour. This then is our commission today; this is the Christ-given task to all who know His love and grace. Let us not hesitate to obey Him because the task He assigned us is of vast dimensions, or because the powers of godlessness appear so formidable and militant in our day. Oh, let us be about our King's business, giving Him of our best, working together with Him in faith and in love, knowing that He is with us even unto the end of the world.

*"Shall we, whose souls are lighted  
With wisdom from on high,  
Shall we, to men benighted,  
The lamp of life deny?"*

*Salvation, oh, salvation!  
The joyful sound proclaim,  
Till earth's remotest nation  
Has learned Messiah's name."*