

# THE GIFTS OF GOD

John 4:1-26

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Mass.

Jan. 12, 1964, 11:00 A.M.

## Introduction

The other day I had the opportunity of hearing the State of the Union message by President Johnson. I was impressed by the simplicity of the language as well as by the comprehensiveness of his propositions. Any American would have been able to understand him. There was no rhetoric in his speech; it was rather homely and prosaic. His list of proposals was all-embracing, when he declared unconditional war on poverty, hunger, ignorance, and other human ills both at home and abroad.

His speech is symptomatic of our age. We have come to think that the basic needs of men refer to his physical needs, to wit, food, shelter, clothing and the technical education to get these. It is surprising how all modern nations look at their problems from this perspective. As a matter of fact, the words of our President could have been expected from the mouth of many of the heads of modern governments. For our civilization -- including East and West -- has become, in the words of Karl Barth, a civilization of things.

## I. The Bible and physical needs of men

- A. From the Biblical point of view there is no denial of the fact that material things are important and basic to human life. Adam and Eve were created from the dust of the earth from the beginning. They had a body as well as a soul, and God provided them with plants and animals, not only in order that they might rule over them, but also that they might eat thereof.

The Hebrew people to a great extent measured God's blessings in terms of material prosperity.

In the ministry of Jesus, attention is given to both the physical and spiritual needs of men. According to the first three gospels, Jesus proclaims the kingdom of heaven as impending and also to some extent present in his words and deeds. This means among other things spiritual blessings like forgiveness, freedom from tradition and man-made rules and direct access to the presence of God. But the signs of the kingdom are also presented in terms of the fulfillment of everyday needs. Jesus heals the sick, give sight to the blind and feeds the hungry. One passage in Luke might be taken as a summary statement of how Jesus came to fulfil both the physical and spiritual needs of men:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach

good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” (4:18)

In the great judgement scene of Matthew 25:31 ff. the separation between the sheep and the goats takes place in accordance with the attention given to the physical needs of the little ones -- the little ones are the believers in Christ.

”When the Son of Man,” says Matthew, ”comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ’Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundations of the world:  
for I was hungry and you gave me food,  
I was thirsty and you gave me drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you clothed me, I was in prison and you came to me.’  
Then the righteous will answer him, ’When did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and gave thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothed thee? And when did we see thee in prison and visit thee?’ And the King will answer them, ’Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me.’”

It is unmistakably clear that the Christian can never escape responsibility for the physical needs of men. Even as a member of the nation he has to be concerned with the physical and social welfare of his fellow-men.

B. On the other hand, it is equally clear that there is a recurring warning in the N.T. against those who think that man lives by bread alone.

Jesus himself sounds this warning. When tempted by Satan to convert stones into bread in order to satisfy his physical hunger, he categorically answers: ”Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” Mt. 4:8

The Gospel of John is especially concerned with the confusion that men make between the material and temporary things -- the lesser gifts of God, so to speak, and the eternal and abiding Word of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ.

After the miracles of the multiplication of the bread and the fish, the people saw the sign which he had done and said, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." And Jesus, perceiving that they were about to come to take him by force to make him king, he withdrew to the hills himself.

But the crowds searched him out and found him on the other side of the sea. And they said, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food which endureth to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you."

The point here is that bread is necessary, but it satisfies only the temporary needs of man. Yet it is usually the perishable food that man strives after.

The same point is made in the story of the Samaritan woman which we read at the beginning of the service. When Jesus says to her, "Everone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst", she can only think that, if she can get that water, she will not have to come to the well to draw it.

The perspective of those who want to crown Jesus because he fed them, and of the woman of Samaria because she thought she was being offered a system of modern plumbing, is very much with us. "Give us more things and still more things, and we shall have a full and ample life," seems to be our motto.

Even Bertrand Russell, the famous British humanist, protests that confident assumption of popular movements that are impressing men's minds that the most important thing in a man's life is the size of his income, and that the sure road to happiness is for him to find ways of increasing it, is an insulting libel upon human nature and a palpable untruth.

He says, I believe this involves too passive a conception of what constitutes happiness. It is true that, in the industrial world, large sections of the population are too poor to have any possibility of a good life; but it is not true that a good life will come of itself with a diminution of poverty. Very few of the well-to-do classes have a good life at present, and perhaps socialism could substitute the evils which now affect the more prosperous in place of the evils resulting from destitution.

This analysis of the modern situation agrees full well with the judgement of the N.T. "Man cannot live by bread alone." Once we have a well-fed, well-clad, well-housed and well-educated society, this fact in itself does not mean the end of evil among men, nor the beginning of paradise on earth.

Furthermore, it is also evident that government, as we understand it in our nation, cannot address itself to the problems facing us, except in terms of the physical and social welfare of the people -- that is, government is concerned with the economic and legal structure of our society, but cannot touch the problems of the deeper needs of man. So we can say that although the church can never turn its attention away from the material needs of men, its basic concern has to do with the meaning and purpose of human existence.

## II. The gift of God -- the water of life springing unto eternal life.

In this context, the second part of the saying just quoted is relevant: "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." It is the claim of the Christian church that the word of God available to man has been revealed in the person, deeds and words of Jesus.

This involves a complete affirmation of the personal reality of God, and at the same time of his perfect freedom.

The Samaritan woman thought that God was enshrined either in Mt. Gerizim or in Mt. Zion, but Jesus put her on the straight path: "Woman, believe me," he said, "the hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... The hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipper will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

God has chosen to reveal himself in Jesus Christ and through that event he has opened up the possibility for man to see himself totally in personal terms as a child of the heavenly Father, the creator. To him alone do we owe our lives, and in his hands is our destiny. To worship and serve him through Christ is life eternal.

Furthermore, He has chosen to break down all human barriers that divide man from man.

The Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans, but there is Jesus in his sovereign freedom breaking down the barriers of religious and racial animosity and saying: "For you, oh despised woman of Samaria, is the water of life, also."

Other N.T. writers have put the same message in other words:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian and Scythian, slave or free man, but Christ is all, in all.

**We could go on, but suffice it to say that today as well as tomorrow the task of the church is to elucidate and exemplify the meaning of the two great commandments in the light of the revelation of God in Christ and of the present predicament of man.**

**"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."**

**And, "You shall love your neighbor as thyself."**