

Introduction

In the New Testament there are four gospel accounts. We are currently studying the gospel according to Matthew, but there are also the gospels according to Mark, Luke, and John. Through multiple lenses and perspectives God has provided for us a full witness to the words and works of Jesus. And among the gospels there is some over-lap here and there. But here is a striking fact. There are only two miracles that are recounted in each of the four gospels. One of those is Jesus' resurrection. And the other is the miracle called the feeding of the five thousand. Clearly, the Holy Spirit deems this miracle highly significant. That is where we turn our attention this morning.

[Read Text; Pray]

When John got to the end of the gospel he penned, he remarked that "there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." The so-called feeding of the five thousand is one of many mighty works performed by Jesus. It demonstrates his infinite and supernatural power. Once again his work attests to his message. Once again the truths he proclaimed are highlighted and underscored. Once again his work demands that we give careful attention to his words.

We could sum up the main point of the text this morning in this way. Jesus uses the sparsest resources available to accomplish the incredible feat of providing more than enough to feed-to-the-full an enormous number of people. It is estimated that if 5,000 men were present, then by the time you add the women and children, there were likely as many as 25,000 mouths that Jesus fed with only five loaves and two fish. That is mind-blowing. It was a miracle.

So mind-blowing is it that certain folk simply do not believe it happened this way. Theological liberals reject the supernatural. From that camp has come a couple of explanations in the face of the witness of each of the four

gospels. Some hold that the feeding was a cleverly planned scheme to hoodwink the crowds. What happened, they suggest, is that the disciples hid a huge cache of bread and fish in one of the caves that dotted the desolate location. And Jesus stationed himself at the mouth of the cave. The disciples passed the bread and the fish through the sleeves of Jesus robe so that it appeared that he was creating fish and bread in his hands. If this were true, Jesus is a fraud. He is not someone to follow or believe in. Others have suggested that what Jesus really did here was to convince those who had thought to pack a lunch to be generous and share with those who had not. In this case the gospel writers have banded together to lie. And how could we trust anything they have to say?

No, this was a genuine and supernatural miracle performed by Jesus to feed a horde of hungry people who had come to a desolate place to see and experience his mighty work. They got what they were seeking. And yet the power of this miracle goes beyond the miracle itself. Powerful lessons are also being taught through the working of this miracle.

First, I want you to see . . .

I. An Enlightened Teacher with Undeniable Kindness.

A. Jesus had heard that Herod was taking notice of his fame. It was not in the interest of his purpose to stir-up Herod's intrigue at the time. So he retreated from public view and made his way to a deserted area. Up to now Jesus' ministry had been in the cities and the towns. He went from one village to the next preaching and teaching the gospel of the kingdom and authenticating his words with his mighty works. But at this point he departs from the towns to an isolated location.

But he was not to get any alone time. The folks learned that Jesus was departing and they followed along on foot walking around the shoreline of the sea. They left their towns and headed into the wilderness in hot pursuit. By the time Jesus reached his destination, eager people had already assembled there.

We need to bear in mind the nature of this crowd. They are coming from the surrounding cities and towns where Jesus had been working. Recall how Jesus had castigated those cities for their lack of repentance. They

were excited by the works of Jesus and anxious to see more. But it was because of their hard-heartedness that Jesus had begun to teach in parables. And one of the lessons of the parables was that most who exhibit an outward interest in Jesus lack a heart that will ultimately deny itself to follow him. Evidence of their hard hearts was uncovered only a day after this big event. The very crowds who came out ended up turning away and no longer following him. Even those who had been counted disciples turned away. But Jesus was enlightened to them; he knew their hearts already.

The fact that Jesus knew the hearts of the people tells us something important about Jesus. It helps us see the wonder of the person of Jesus in a brighter light. It increases our awe of him. Jesus knew full well what was in the hearts of these people. And yet Matthew tells us that when Jesus went ashore he saw the great crowd and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. He knew their hearts were cold, but he saw their need and was moved with mercy toward them.

B. Here is a lesson in compassion for followers of Jesus. When you look at people around you, what stands out? What do you see first? Do you see their cold hearts? Do you see their evil deeds? Are you repulsed by their politics? Or do you see people who are miserable? Do you see people who are hurting? Do you see people who need compassion?

C. Here is also a comforting assurance for followers of Jesus to grasp. Hear this and let it soak in this morning. Come back to this well again and again. If Jesus, knowing the cold hearts of the crowds, had compassion for them, what must fill his heart when he looks on the condition of his true followers? If Jesus has compassion on those who are shortly to turn away, you can be sure he has no less mercy upon those who deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him.

Psalm 147:11 declares that "the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love." I just want you to be assured that if he is compassionate to those who want his works but not him, he will certainly be compassionate to those in whom he takes pleasure. How helpful this is when you feel weary and worn, when you are burdened and heavy-laden, when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

You can preach to your soul what David preached to his: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God." You can hope in God! He will not deal unkindly with you; he overflows with compassion! If with his enemies, how much more with his friends!

Next, I want you to see . . .

II. An Unforgettable Experience with an Unmistakable Point.

A. Thanksgiving is near, and as surely as we will be observing a holiday, we will be feasting. Since I was a kid I have always anticipated Thanksgiving almost as much as Christmas because I love the food! And I always eat my fill and am more than satisfied. Fish and bread may not sound as appetizing as turkey and dressing, but we must keep in mind that on that day in the desert, Jesus was doing the cooking. Actually, Jesus was doing the creating. Could you imagine what it would be like to have experienced the miracle of this massive feeding? It is not only the magnitude of the feeding, but for the agrarian people of the day, having a free meal that would fill them up would have been a delight. This would be a day they would remember for a long, long time. Those memories would carry with them an unmistakable point.

B. The unmistakable point is that God gives bread from heaven. God is the supplier who meets the needs of people. They need to turn to him to meet the deepest of their needs. Several features of this miracle stand out and underscore this point. The first feature is the location. The miracle took place in the wilderness. It was in a desolate place. Most of the ministry of Jesus up to this point had happened in their cities and towns. Jesus had gone to them and went from town to town. But now he is retreating to the wilderness. And as he retreats to the wilderness, the people have exited their towns and come on foot to a desert place. That is the location.

The second feature here is the size of the crowd. It was an enormous number of people. Five thousand men besides women and children means there may have been as many as 25,000 people. It was a mass of folks.

Third, there was a need for food. It was near the end of the day. The time was evening, and the disciples were quite conscious that the people would be getting hungry. They would need energy to make their way back home.

Fourth, we see in the disciples a failure to trust. Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd themselves, but they could only point out that they did NOT have enough food to share. Fifth, we remark the compassion of Jesus. He exhibited sympathy for the crowd. Sixth, there is a looking to heaven. Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and LOOKED UP TO HEAVEN before breaking them and distributing them to the crowd. Seventh, there was a provision of meat and bread. The crowd was served from five loaves and two fish. Eighth, there was feasting and there was thorough satisfaction. "They all ate and were satisfied." This was not the Lord's Supper, consisting of tiny pieces, but everyone had plenty and ate until they were full.

Now there is a reason I rehearse all these features. These features are notable because of similarities to another mass feeding which occurred early in Israelite history. The location was also a desolate place. It was the wilderness of Sin. The Israelites had exited their homes in Egypt. Following God's leadership, they came on foot to a desolate place. The size of the crowd was massive, consisting of the entire nation of Israel. There was a need for food. The Israelites felt acutely the sensation of hunger—so much so that they thought of their days in Egypt with a dreamy fantasy. And there was a lack of faith. The Israelites grumbled and complained that God had brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness to kill them with hunger. But God was compassionate. He heard their grumbling and determined to meet their need. And he directed their attention to heaven. Jesus looked up to heaven and blessed the bread and fish. The Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread FROM HEAVEN." And as Jesus gave the crowds bread and meat, the Lord provided the Israelites meat in the evening and bread in the morning. As the crowds had eaten what Jesus distributed and were FULL, the promise of the Lord was that the Israelites would be filled.

Unmistakably, what happened in the wilderness on the beach of the Sea of Galilee reminded the crowd of God's miraculous provision of food for his people, indeed that for 40 years they ate bread from heaven. Perhaps they would be aware of the details of Exodus 16. Verse 10 says, "as soon as Aaron spoke to the congregation . . . they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. And the Lord said

to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

The allusion of the miracle of Jesus to God's provision of manna called the crowds to look at Jesus and see the glory of the Lord, to look at Jesus and see him as God's provision for our deepest need, to look to Jesus and know Yahweh is the Lord our God.

Interestingly, in the wilderness of Sin, the Lord told the people that in the evening they would eat meat and in the morning they would be filled with bread. They woke up the next morning and found the manna like frost on the ground. Meanwhile, we learn from John 6 that the Jews in the desolate place on the sea of Galilee went to sleep there and woke up the next morning to find that Jesus was not there any more. He had walked on the water in the night back to Capernaum. So they went there seeking him. And when they found him, they referred to the fact that their fathers ate the manna in the wilderness that as it is written, "he gave them bread from heaven to eat." Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." [They really liked that bread that Jesus had given them. But they were missing the point!] so "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.'"

Jesus' miracle was an act of compassion for hungry stomachs, but it was also a gospel object lesson. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Jesus is the bread that satisfies the hunger and the water that quenches the thirst of those longing for more than just a full stomach but who long for righteousness. Do you want a satisfied soul? Peace with God? His righteousness in your account? His transforming power in your living? Do you want to really live? You must eat the living bread. Jesus said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (John 6:51). The act of eating is a metaphor for

believing. You eat food because you believe it will satisfy the hunger of your body. And you come to Jesus in faith because you are convinced he will satisfy the hunger of your soul. And he will. But you must believe.

III. An Unimaginable Privilege with Unmistakable Lesson.

A. The unimaginable privilege in this miracle to which I refer is the privilege of serving with Jesus. It was Jesus who blessed the bread and broke it. But the disciples were privileged to distribute it. "Jesus broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds."

Jesus involved his followers in the work of displaying his glory and communicating that glory to the crowds. What mercy and what privilege! To be a servant of Christ is a blessing. The psalmist said "A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness." And that is what these disciples got to experience—the joy of being Christ's servants. But there is an unmistakable lesson here.

B. The unmistakable lesson is Christ can do through you mighty things that you simply cannot accomplish on your own. The disciples came to Jesus in the interest of the fact that it was nearing sundown and the people, having come so far away from civilization, would need to get some food. The only obvious solution was that the people could go into nearby towns to buy food for themselves. But Jesus said, "they do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

The disciples protested. They looked at their resources and saw next to nothing. What good would five loaves and two fish do for 25,000 people? Like so many others in the Bible, and like each of us so much of the time, we magnify our limitations. Think of Moses. God is calling him to go to Egypt and lead God's people out, and he says, "But who am I?" "But who are you?" "But they will not believe me." "But I am not eloquent." "But just send someone else." Jesus calls the disciples to feed the crowds, but the disciples say, "We only have 5 loaves and 3 fishes."

What is your excuse? Why do you doubt God? Which of your resources are you using as an excuse not to obey? We magnify our limitations. And we

need to understand our limitations, to grasp our inabilities, to see ourselves for what we are. But those limitations are not barriers when God is at work. In fact, our limited and puny resources are God's opportunity to display his great strength.

What good would 5 stones and a sling do in the hands of a youth facing a mighty giant? Such puny resources they were that the giant himself laughed. But it was David who removed the giant's head that day. It was because he did not come with confidence in his own resources but in the name of the Lord.

Do not bring to God your skill, strength, great confidence in yourself. Recognize your inability. Own up to your weaknesses. But own what Jesus said to the Apostle Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." And make the same resolve as the apostle did, "Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." Your limited resources and mine are not inhibitors to the work of God. They are the channels by which he manifests his glory by demonstrating that the power is not ours but his. How we need to remember this principle when we face difficult circumstances. How we need to remember this principle when we are seeking to break down a stronghold of sin! How we need to remember this whenever we are sharing the gospel. Our weaknesses and our inabilities provide the opportunity for us experience the mighty working of Jesus for the glory of Jesus.

Conclusion

The dinner in the desert created by Jesus served by the disciples is a glorious display of the compassion of Jesus, the offering of Jesus, and the power of Jesus at work through those who follow him. Believe in him. Obey him. And enjoy the wonder of him at work in you this week.