

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand: John 6:1-15
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This past week I spent a day in Philadelphia with some fellow pastors in the 9 Marks pastoral network. We had a really encouraging time together. We prayed together, spent time in the Word together, ate together, and talked about life and ministry and a variety of topics. It was a very edifying time of fellowship with those brothers. One of the older brothers among us, a guy who has been pastoring for 25 years, shared some interesting things about his past. He told us how as a kid and teenager he was really disruptive at church. He was just a rebellious, ornery kid, at home and church. He shared stories of being reprimanded by his dad, reprimanded by Sunday School teachers. In fact, just recently he was back at that church where he grew up, he was there for a funeral I think, and an elderly woman in that church who has been there for many years, was reminding him what a bad kid he was.

And yet here he is. God called him into ministry and has sustained him in faithful Gospel ministry for a quarter of a century. Isn't that cool! Isn't that just how God loves to work in people's lives! I think of that in light of our passage for this morning because it reminds me of the disciples, of those first 12 disciples, and of all of us who are following Jesus. The twelve didn't have much of a clue about anything at first. They didn't have anything to offer Jesus. It wasn't like Jesus was desperate for them to be on His team. He wasn't offering them a signing bonus or anything like that! They, and we, were just helpless, wandering souls until Jesus came in His mercy to make us His own. And what we'll see so wonderfully in this passage is how Jesus accomplished His purposes through disciples such as us.

Our passage for this morning is a familiar one to many of us. If you grew up going to Sunday School, you probably heard this story multiple times. If you are familiar with the Bible, if you have attended church, then you are most likely very familiar with many of the details of this particular miracle of Jesus. Interestingly, this is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. It's the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

Something we see about Jesus in this passage is that He is a compassionate shepherd. In Mark's account it says that Jesus "had compassion on [the crowds], because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus cares for people. He provides for people. And He does so in a way that is far beyond what people even realize they need. Here Jesus provides for a tangible, immediate need—the need for physical food. But as we'll see as we continue to

study John 6, Jesus is pointing to a deeper need that we all have and a deeper provision that He has come to offer.

Jesus here feeds the five thousand, but so much of what is happening in this event has to do with the disciples. In the Gospel of Mark we learn that the feeding of the 5,000 happens just after the disciples have returned from the mission Jesus sent them on throughout the surrounding towns. And Jesus immediately shows His compassion toward them in suggesting that they come away by themselves to a desolate place and rest a while. You can read that in Mark 6. It says, *“The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”* (Mark 6:30–31, ESV)

These guys were exhausted. They needed some down time. And Jesus knew their needs. He knew the exhaustion they were experiencing after such an intense time of ministry. Jesus shows Himself here as their compassionate shepherd.

We realize here, too, how wildly popular Jesus was. People came from all over, and they pressed in to try to see Jesus, hear Jesus, be healed by Jesus, so much so that Jesus and the disciples couldn't even find the time or space to sit down and have a meal. So Jesus seeks to provide His disciples with some rest. He wants them to be able to be by themselves for a time and to eat a meal.

So Jesus took them to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also known as the Sea of Tiberias. The problem was by the time they got there they couldn't be by themselves. The crowds were so eager to be with Jesus that they ran along the shore all the way around to where the boat arrived on the other side. This would have been a major interruption in the minds of the disciples. They thought they were going to finally have a little peace and quiet, a little time to themselves, a little rest and relaxation. But they arrive, and there's already a crowd of people there. And they notice that many of the faces are the same faces they had just seen on the other side of the lake. The disciples might have been at their wit's end. Can't they do anything to get away from these relentless crowds?

And we've learned this about the crowds . . . what verse 2 says about their interest in the miraculous signs, the signs Jesus was doing on the sick. For so many in these crowds, the draw was the miracles. They weren't so much interested in what Jesus was teaching. They weren't perceiving Jesus true identity. They were mainly looking for miraculous healings, and Jesus saw right through that. As we learned back at the end of chapter 2.

“Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.” (John 2:23–25, ESV)

But, still, Jesus has compassion on this vast crowd. And He uses this situation to teach a lesson to His disciples. Verse 3 tells us that “Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.” And we’re told what time of year this was in verse 4. The Passover was at hand, which happens in the springtime. In verse 10 John mentions that there was much grass in that place. The Gospel of Mark adds the little detail that the grass was green, which fits with John’s mention here of the Passover, because the grass would be green in the spring, at the time of the Passover, as opposed to brown grass in the summer months when the sun is so hot. It’s interesting to see these little details and how the 4 Gospels fit together. We have these 4 perspectives on Jesus’ life, told from different vantage points, but together giving us a rich picture of what Jesus taught and accomplished during His time on earth. And it’s interesting to see such minute details (like the “green” grass) that are included that show us we’re getting eyewitness accounts of these events.

Well, what is the lesson Jesus wants to teach His disciples here? Did you notice in verse 6 that Jesus intends to test Philip in this? Now, just put yourself in the position of one of these disciples. You’re extremely tired. You’re emotionally spent. You’ve been with people, people, people, everywhere. And what you’d really like is just a bit of quiet time, a time to regroup with the other disciples and have some small group time with Jesus. But here’s the crowd pressing in yet again. And Jesus looks up (verse 5) and sees the crowd coming, has compassion on them, and asks Philip . . . By the way, He’s probably turning to Philip with this question because Philip was from this area. Back in John 1:44 we’re told that Philip was from Bethsaida. So Jesus says to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” And then verse 6 says this amazing thing! It almost makes us feel sorry for Philip. Jesus could have spared Philip this frustrating moment, but it’s for Philip’s good, and for the good of all the disciples, including us. Verse 6 gives us this insight into the mind and intention of Jesus. “[Jesus] said this to test [Philip], for he himself knew what he would do.”

That verse makes me smile. Jesus knew the miracle He was about to perform here. He knew He had the power to feed every person in this entire crowd. He doesn’t need any help from Philip. He doesn’t need to buy any food. But in order to make a very important point, and a very memorable point, to His disciples,

He begins with this question. “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” Given the situation, it may sound like Jesus is being insensitive to His disciples’ needs. It may seem like He’s being uncaring, unloving. But He is the compassionate shepherd, not only to the crowd but to His disciples. He has a profound lesson to teach His disciples here.

Philip, of course, responds with skepticism. What is Jesus thinking!? Does He really think we’re going to try to feed this vast crowd? Philip answers, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” 200 denarii was a lot of money. One denarius was the equivalent of a day’s wages for a day laborer. So we’re talking about 200 days’ wages to feed this crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. And Philip is thinking, even if we spent that much money it still wouldn’t satisfy the hunger of this crowd. Each person would only get a very small amount of food. So he’s thinking, Are you telling us, Jesus, that you want us to go out and spend that ridiculous amount of money just so we can give a snack to this massive, annoying crowd so they can continue to interrupt what was supposed a time of rest for us? That was the frustration the disciples were facing in this. They don’t have that kind of money. Even if they did, how would they transport that much food in a timely manner? It was as if Philip and the other disciples were saying, “Jesus, you must be crazy if you think we’re going to feed them. We have neither the resources nor the ability nor the desire to do so.”

You’ve heard it said that people can be so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Well the disciples in this case are so earthly minded that they are no heavenly good. In the Gospel of Mark the disciples say to Jesus, “Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” The disciples are so practically minded that they can’t even conceive of something miraculous happening here.

Apply these things to your own heart as we’re considering them in this story. Do you ever get so wrapped up in the practical details of Kingdom work that you end up telling Jesus, “that’s impossible”? Practicality is a good thing. We certainly need to think practically and act prudently and plan carefully. But let us be warned here never to shake our finger in Jesus’ face and say, “You’re crazy! That’s impossible!”

We need to have faith. And we need to pray. There are 2 application points for us. Rather than putting our heads down in frustration because we can’t see any human solution, we should get excited and think, “This is a great time for Jesus to show up and do something miraculous!” And rather than grumbling in our pessimism, we should pray. When there’s something facing us that

seems impossible, let us cry out in prayer and in faith. And let us wait patiently to see what our Lord will accomplish in and through us.

What's so awesome about this event is that Jesus commands the disciples to do something they cannot do, and then He does it for them and through them. What a beautiful portrait of the Christian life. This is what it is to be a Christian. God commands us to do things that are impossible for us to do. And then He accomplishes those things for us and in us and through us.

Just last Sunday I was preaching on inability and unwillingness. Unwilling to come to Jesus, as we saw in verse 40. The religious leaders were refusing to come to Jesus, refusing to believe in Him. They were totally unwilling. And we also looked at Romans 8:7-8 in connection with that, "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." It's impossible for anyone, on their own, to turn to Jesus.

I've been reading a book entitled *The Godly Man's Picture* by Thomas Watson, originally published in 1666. Watson was a Puritan preacher in England in the 1600s. And he makes the point early on in the book that godliness is a supernatural thing. It's a miracle, as we've learned in the Gospel of John. To be born again is a miracle of God. Watson writes, "By nature we inherit nothing but evil. . . . Weeds grow of themselves; flowers are planted. Godliness is a celestial plant that comes from the New Jerusalem. Therefore it is called a 'fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5:22). A man has no more power to change himself than to create himself."¹ That's the predicament we're in as sinful human beings. We're powerless to turn to Jesus. We don't even want to turn to Jesus.

And yet we must. We must turn to Jesus. We must obey Jesus. We must repent and believe and follow Him. He has a mission for us. Think of the Great Commission, which I read before Stephanie's baptism last week . . . Jesus tells us, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*"

What are we to do with that in light of the inability and unwillingness of the sinful human condition? Here's what we are to do: we are to look to the Lord and ask Him to work miracles in us and through us. We are to trust in Him to accomplish through us what we could never bring about on our own.

Take another command. "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 "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark

¹ Page 13.

12:30-31). We cannot do those things on our own. Our hearts are focused inward. We are self-focused and self-serving creatures until God makes us new creations in Him. And then we do delight in Him, and we do so increasingly as He sanctifies us, and that delight in Him spills over in love toward others.

We could consider many more commands in the same way. Let me mention just one more. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5). We don't have it in us to do these things. We can't flip a switch in our hearts that will give us the desire and the ability to do this. Therefore we need to cry out to God for help.

Some have objected to the idea that God commands things that are impossible for us to do. I mentioned Pelagius last Sunday in the discussion about the freedom of the will. Pelagius, back in the early 400s A. D., contended that God can only hold us responsible for things that we actually have the ability to do. Pelagius said that God would only command us to do things that we have the power to do. But that simply doesn't square with the teaching of Scripture. There are many commands in Scripture, and yet it's clear that in our flesh we are utterly unable to obey any of those commands. Think of John 15:5 where Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Is that discouraging to you? Is it discouraging to you that you can't do anything apart from Christ? It shouldn't be discouraging. Because the corresponding truth is that with Christ we can do everything! Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

So here are the disciples, assuming that the Lord's command is utterly impossible. But they are about to be used by the Lord to accomplish that very task. They cannot do what He has commanded, and it's right for them to recognize that. Their fault is that they don't ask Jesus for help.

You see, we need to recognize our *inability* to obey, but we also need to take seriously our *responsibility* to obey. Even though we can't do it, we must do it. And then we must celebrate God's ability to do these things through us, and that should cause us to cry out to Him for help. This is what Augustine affirmed in that well-known quote from his *Confessions*. It was Augustine whom Pelagius was reacting against, and this is one of the lines that infuriated Pelagius. Augustine wrote, in a prayer to God: "Grant what You command, and command what You will." In other words, give me the grace to heed Your commands, and command whatever You will, even though it's impossible for me to do on my own.

This is the attitude the disciples should have embraced, but didn't, at least not yet. All they could see was impossibility. Jesus asked this question of Philip to provoke his heart, and all the disciples' hearts to bring them to a realization of who Jesus is and what He can do. Jesus wants them to trust in Him. He wants them to look to Him for help. He wants them to rely fully on Him.

Well, then we see that Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, finds a boy who has a little bit of food. Five barley loaves and two fish. But Andrew is skeptical as well. He says, "but what are they for so many?" Then Jesus takes charge and tells the disciples to have the people sit down.

It's interesting the way the miracle, itself, is described. In a way, it's not described at all. The specifics of how the five loaves and two fish became enough to feed thousands is not told. It doesn't say that Jesus made hundreds of baskets appear that were full of bread and fish. It doesn't say that bread and fish fell from the sky. Jesus could have done it in these ways. But it just says in verse 11 that "Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted." Somehow, it multiplies as He was distributing it. He just kept giving and giving and giving. What started as five loaves and two fish mysteriously increased to become more than enough food for 20,000 or more people (the 5,000 men plus women and children). And this wasn't just a little bit of food, as Philip had imagined earlier. They could have spent a whole lot of money and given everyone a light snack. Jesus took a boy's lunch and multiplied it into a feast for this incredible number of hungry people.

I think the significance of how Jesus performed this particular miracle is that it focuses the attention on Himself and vividly illustrates what He says later in the chapter, "I am the bread of life." That's recorded in verse 35. The bread that satisfied their hunger came from the One who is the bread of life. And the bread came from Him mysteriously, miraculously, as though it was His own life that He was breaking and giving to the people. The bread came from Him in such a way that this miracle would be the perfect backdrop for the statement, "I am the bread of life."

Then the disciples collected twelve baskets full of leftovers. This is yet another carefully orchestrated piece of Jesus' plan in this. He is leading His disciples as their compassionate shepherd, wanting to test them and teach them, and this was the final piece of the miracle that was meant to bring the lesson home. He wanted each one of them (all twelve of them) to be able to fill a basket full of leftovers as a clear demonstration of Jesus' power and provision. As they stood there afterwards, each of them holding a basket overflowing with food, they should have been thinking

about how they scoffed at Jesus' command to them. They should have been realizing that the impossible command was entirely possible with Jesus. What they could not do, Jesus did. And He didn't "just barely" do it. He over did it. Everyone ate their fill, and there were plenty of leftovers.

The disciples should have been amazed also at the fact that Jesus used them as an integral part of the plan. They distributed the food, and now they're cleaning up the leftovers. They thought they were missing out on the rest time they had been hoping for. But they got something better instead. They got to experience a taste of heaven right here on earth. Thousands upon thousands of people, gathered from various places, all with their attention on Jesus Christ who is supernaturally and gloriously providing for all their needs. That's real rest. To be with Jesus, observing His glory and power up close, being satisfied in the One who is the bread of life. That's true rest. That's the rest we look forward to in heaven.

As we continue through John chapter 6 we'll give more thought to Jesus as the bread of life. But notice the reaction of the crowd to this miracle, as we conclude our passage here at the beginning of the chapter. In verses 14-15 we see a typical response from the people.

Read vv. 14-15

They recognize something really amazing is happening here. They even make an Old Testament connection to what the prophet Moses had spoken about. I read that passage last week from Deuteronomy 18 where Moses prophesied that God would raise up a prophet like him and the people were to listen to him. Well this crowd is saying, He's the guy!

The problem is, they're mainly looking for a political deliverer. And here's where that verse from the end of John 2 connects again. Jesus didn't entrust himself to them, because he knew all people. Jesus knew what was in their minds and hearts. He knew their intentions. And He knew their expectations didn't line up with His real identity and purposes. So He withdrew to the mountain by himself.

Compassion

As you consider this story, marvel at Jesus' compassion on the crowd. This is an overbearing crowd that won't even let Jesus and His disciples get away for some rest. The disciples would have been frustrated with this crowd. Even we, as readers, are frustrated with them. We want to say to them, "Get a clue! They're trying to get away. They don't want to be with you anymore!" But Jesus is full of surprises—wonderful surprises. He doesn't send them away. He doesn't rebuke them. He has compassion on them, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. So He becomes their compassionate shepherd. This is

our Savior, our precious Savior. He is so tender-hearted. He is so loving. He cares for those in need. His heart breaks to see people wandering astray like this, without direction or meaning, without a shepherd to lead them.

Teaching

Another thing to realize in this story, something that John doesn't mention but Mark and Luke do, is that Jesus teaches them. This is a primary way that He shepherds them. Mark 6 says, "[Jesus] had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things." In Luke's account of this event it says that Jesus "spoke to them of the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:11). That's what Jesus was always teaching about. Jesus was a compassionate shepherd to the crowd by speaking to them of the kingdom of God. He called people to repent of their sin and embrace the Good News of the Gospel. That is compassion. Some call that hateful and narrow-minded and insensitive. But we see it here in the most compassionate man who has ever walked the face of the earth.

Provision

And then, of course, Jesus provided for their practical needs. He fed them. They were out in the middle of nowhere, and apparently only one mother remembered to send her boy with a lunch that day. Everyone else was so focused on the opportunity to see Jesus that they didn't give a thought to what they would do for dinner. But Jesus fed them. His compassion for them overflowed in teaching them the truth and feeding them dinner.

I hope your faith is encouraged through this event in the ministry of Jesus. I hope you're moved by the compassion of our Savior—the compassion He demonstrated for His disciples in teaching them this lesson, and the compassion He showed toward the crowd. He is the compassionate shepherd.

He also shows Himself here as the bread of life, which is an image for us to meditate on as we partake of the Lord's Supper. In verse 35 of this chapter Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Then several verses later He says, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51). Jesus gave His own flesh, His own life, as a sacrifice for our sin. His body was broken for us.

The feeding of the five thousand points us to the last supper. At the last supper Jesus fed His disciples, and He did some of the very same things He did at the meal we've read about today. Mark's account of the feeding of the 5,000 says, "And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people." Now listen to the very similar wording of

Mark 14:22, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. "And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body.'" Jesus fed the five thousand with the bread that multiplied in His hands as He broke it. And the next day He told them, "I am the bread of life." And "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Then, at the last supper, He fed His disciples. And after giving them the bread that He broke with His hands, He told them, "this is my body."

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper now, let us feed on Christ. Let us be satisfied in Him. He gave His life for us, and rose again on the third day, and is coming again. And if we come to Him, He will satisfy our deep spiritual hunger. If we believe in Him, He will quench our deep spiritual thirst. As we eat and drink of this meal, let us rejoice that we have a compassionate shepherd, who gave Himself for us on the cross, that we might be satisfied in Him.