

“LITTLE BECOMES A LOT”  
MATTHEW 14:13-21

One of the most well-known stories in the Bible is the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Prior to this, most of the miracles Jesus had performed were for the benefit of *individuals*—healing individuals who were sick or disabled, expelling demons from individuals, and even raising individuals from the dead. But turning five loaves of bread and two fish into a satisfying meal for more than five thousand was a miracle for the masses. Every single person who was present on this occasion benefitted from Jesus’ power, kindness, and generosity.

Ironically, it is a miracle that took place at a time when Jesus’ popularity was waning, shortly after He was rejected by His hometown (13:53f.) and not long after religious leaders condemned Him and accused Him of being demon-possessed himself (12:24). It also occurred on the heels of John-the-Baptist’s tragic death at the hands of Herod. When Herod heard about Jesus and all the miracles He was doing in Galilee, he concluded that He was a resurrected John-the-Baptist, and Luke tells us that He sought to see Him (9:9).

However, I assure you that Jesus did not feed the masses because He wanted to boost His public approval rating. Being popular or well-liked was of no interest to Him. His sole concern was fulfilling the assignment His Father had given Him to do, which was to inaugurate the kingdom of God on earth and establish His rule over that kingdom. That role of kingdom Ruler had been predicted throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, and every Jew in the first century was eagerly anticipating this Person whom they called ‘Messiah’.

But as you know by now, Jesus did not fit the messianic profile that most Jews had conceived in their imaginations, so they were not sure what to make of Him. The religious leaders had already concluded that He was a fraud, most of His family and hometown had rejected Him, and a lot of the general population were ambivalent. Nevertheless, Jesus continued to do His Father’s will, part of which included fulfilling the prophecies from Scripture about Messiah that pointed to Him. And the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand must be seen, first and foremost, in that light. Let’s look at the story and see how it reinforces Jesus’ identity as Messiah.

Look at **verse 13**. *<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus heard this, He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by Himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed Him on foot from the towns.*

What Jesus heard that compelled Him to withdraw to a desolate place was the news about John the Baptist’s death at the hands of Herod. Some have suggested that He withdrew because He was trying to escape from Herod, who was looking for Him (Luke 9:9). But Mark tells us that Jesus and His disciples were so busy ministering to people that they did not even have time to eat, and that it was Jesus’ idea to go to a desolate place so they could rest (6:31).

Since Jesus and His disciples went by boat to this desolate place it must have been on the other side of the lake, several miles from the towns where they had been ministering. Perhaps they went by boat in order to discourage people from following them—maybe even to give a hint that they needed some privacy. But since the Sea of Galilee is not that big, the crowds could see the boat crossing the lake, determine the direction they were going, and predict where they would land. So, they began walking along the shore in order to meet Jesus whenever and wherever He landed.

**Verse 14.** *<sup>14</sup> When He went ashore he saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them and healed their sick.*

Several years ago, the University of Texas did a study to determine the amount of energy that is exerted when someone preaches or teaches. The study revealed that the energy exerted in one hour of preaching or teaching is equivalent to eight hours of hard manual labor. Jesus had been teaching almost every day, sometimes all day, for many weeks. Besides that, He was engaging with people who were hurting and suffering, and when He healed them, He could feel the energy go out from Him.

Jesus was exhausted. He was physically depleted. And He was grieving the death of His cousin, John the Baptist. Yet in spite of this, when their boat landed and Jesus encountered the crowds on the shore, He did not get annoyed or frustrated or even disappointed. He did not dismiss them or rebuke them or get back in the boat and go somewhere else. Instead, when He saw them, He was deeply moved. Matthew tells us that He had *compassion* on them, and the word “compassion” describes *intense* emotion—a *visceral* reaction.

A couple of weeks ago when Mindy and I were babysitting our two and a half year-old granddaughter, we were chasing and kicking a ball on our driveway, having a marvelous time, when all of the sudden she collided with our frolicking German Shepherd, who sent her flying and then crashing to the pavement. In the split second before she burst into tears, I could tell that she was deeply shaken. She locked her eyes on mine and in those eyes was a look of terror. And when I saw that I had a *visceral* reaction. I could feel something in my gut that compelled me to hurry to her, pick her up, and hold her tight so that I could soothe and comfort her and alleviate her fears.

Mark makes an editorial comment in his account that gives us further insight into how Jesus felt about the crowds who met Him on the shore. <sup>34</sup> *When He went ashore, He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (6:34).* In other words, Jesus saw their desperation and was so moved that He was *compelled* to give them His undivided attention.

Matthew emphasizes that He healed their sick, which reveals a motive for why they traveled such a distance to a remote place. They had seen Jesus heal, they knew He *could* heal, and they were desperate to have Him put His hands on them. And Jesus did not disappoint. But the other Gospel writers tell us that He did more than just heal on this occasion. Mark says that He taught the people “many things”, while Luke specifies that His teaching was about the kingdom of God.

Look at **verse 15**. <sup>15</sup> *Now when it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”*

The disciples were accustomed to large crowds, long sermons, and a teacher that had a much greater appetite for ministry than food. Apparently, Jesus was so attentive to the needs of the crowds that the disciples felt they needed to remind Him to start winding things down. They were in a remote place where there were no shops or stalls to buy food, and the hour was getting late. Luke tells us that the disciples were not just concerned about food, but lodging. Obviously, if they were in a remote place and it was getting late, it would be impossible to get back to their homes before dark, and walking along the rocky shore of the Sea of Galilee in the dark was not safe. So, the disciples made their suggestion in the form of a command, “*Send the crowds away.*”

I am not sure where the disciples’ got the nerve to issue a command to the King of kings and Lord of lords, but Jesus responds with a command of His own. **Verse 16**. <sup>16</sup> *But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”*

Why would Jesus say this? He knew that if the disciples were going to find a sufficient

quantity of food to feed this many people they would have to walk for miles. He knew that even if they were able to locate such a quantity, they did not have the means to transport it back to this isolated place, and by the time they got back it would be dark. Yet Jesus says, *"The [crowds] need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

Don't forget, often when Jesus made a statement or issued a challenge, He was trying to get His audience to consider solutions or outcomes that transcend the typical and ordinary. The disciples had thought of only one solution to the current dilemma: "Food for this many people does not exist in this remote place. Therefore, the people need to go where the food is, which is the nearest town or village, so we must dismiss them now."

In telling the disciples that the crowd does not need to go away, Jesus is reminding them that *man's impossibilities are God's opportunities*. For the God who created the world out of nothing, there are no obstacles, no barriers, and no hindrances that can prevent Him from doing what He wants. He is omnipotent. By commanding them to give the crowds something to eat, He is challenging them to present what they have to Him and let Him make something out of it that can supply the need.

By now the disciples should have known Jesus well enough to expect that when there was a challenge or an obstacle, He often rose to the occasion and astonished them with His power. But they respond to Jesus' command by saying, **verses 17-18**, <sup>17</sup> *"We have only five loaves here and two fish."* <sup>18</sup> *And He said, "Bring them here to me."*

In John's Gospel we learn that Andrew told Jesus that this food came from a small boy (6:9), and one could easily imagine a mother packing this meal for her son's lunch. Five barley loaves (the food of the poor) and the two dried fish that accompanied them were a typical Galilean meal for one person.

The language of the text indicates that the disciples presented this meager meal to Jesus as evidence that it was impossible to feed so many people. The phrase could well be translated, "We have *nothing*, except five loaves and two fish," the emphasis being on "nothing".

But Jesus looks at the boy's lunch and sees an opportunity. It is *something* He can use. So He asks the disciples to bring the food to Him, and, **verse 19**, <sup>19</sup> *Then He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*

Jesus confidently and authoritatively takes matters into His own hands, literally. He knows exactly what He is about to do and how it is going to be done, and He begins by organizing the crowd. He orders them to sit down (literally, "recline") on the grass, which was the typical posture for eating a meal, in groups of fifty (Luke 9:14). Then, Jesus takes the bread and fish, looks up to heaven (the normal posture for prayer) and gives thanks to God. Jesus may well have pronounced the common Jewish benediction, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth" (Blomberg, NAC).

Then Jesus broke the bread and the fish into pieces for distribution to the multitude. Matthew tells us that when Jesus had broken the loaves and the fish, He gave the pieces to the disciples, and the disciples passed them on to the people (Morris, PNTC).

Though the nature of the miracle itself is not described, it seems apparent that as the disciples distributed those broken pieces of food to the crowds they spontaneously expanded or multiplied as they were passed from person to person.

Look at **verses 20-21**. <sup>20</sup> *And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.* <sup>21</sup> *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Some modern day Bible scholars who feel obliged to interpret and explain Jesus' miracles so that they are compatible with science have suggested that the people to whom the food was being distributed merely had a sensation of being full by touching the crust of the bread as it was being passed. But that interpretation, besides being faithless, contradicts all four Gospel accounts which tell us that everyone *ate* and was *satisfied*, and that twelve baskets full of broken pieces were left over. In other words, they ended up with way more food than they started with. This was nothing short of a supernatural phenomenon that cannot be explained by human reasoning.

And, by the way, the crowd could have easily been fifteen or twenty thousand, if one included women and children in the equation.

So, what to make of this? Most of us have read or heard this story so many times that we have, perhaps, ceased to be astounded by this miracle. But this had to have been an awesome thing to have witnessed. As I said earlier, most other miracles that Jesus performed were for the benefit of *individuals*. The crowds could see what Jesus did, but they were not personally affected by the miracle.

But in this miracle, everyone was the beneficiary. Every person could see with his own eyes and feel with her own hands the bread and fish expanding and multiplying, and every one of them ate until they were satisfied. And at the very least they would have been forced to conclude at least two things: 1) Jesus is Someone who truly cares about the masses. 2) Jesus can do things that only God can do.

But even more important, these Galileans had just been confronted with the very real possibility that Jesus was not merely a man who cared for them, but that He is the anticipated Messiah. He is the One they had been looking for. He is the One who fulfilled the prophecies, including the one in Deuteronomy where Moses declared that God was going to raise up a Prophet like Him, only greater (18:15-18).

One of the main things for which Moses was known and revered was providing bread from heaven for the Israelites to eat in the wilderness. Of course, they knew that ultimately God had provided it, but it came to them as a result of Moses' intercession and under Moses' leadership. Jewish tradition held that the Messiah would repeat this miracle of providing bread. So, when Jesus multiplied the bread and fed the multitudes, they connected the dots. *He was that Prophet who like Moses.*

Which is why, in John's account of this story, after Jesus fed the five thousand, the people said, "*This is indeed the Prophet who was to come into the world*" (6:14). And John goes on to say that they determined to make Him King by force (6:15).

Brothers and sisters, if we are going to understand and apply this passage correctly, we must realize that this story is primarily about Jesus proving that He was the Messiah. While it certainly demonstrates Jesus' wonderful compassion, His attentiveness to the needs of people, and His power to transcend the laws of nature and turn a little into a lot, satisfying people's physical appetites was secondary to satisfying people's spiritual appetite.

Here is how I know: After Jesus did the miracle and the crowd intended to make Him King by force, John tells us that He withdrew to a mountain by Himself. He did not let them have their way. Why? Because He knew that they did not yet understand who He really was, what He truly offered, and what He had yet to do. John tells us that the next day the crowds found Jesus on the other side of the lake, and He said to them, "I see you've come because you want me to feed you again." <sup>32</sup> *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. <sup>33</sup> For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."* <sup>34</sup> *They said to Him, "Sir, give us this bread always."*

<sup>35</sup> *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" (John 6:32-35).*

Jesus did not feed the five thousand merely to prove that He had the ability to sustain them physically.

Jesus' ultimate purpose in feeding the five thousand was to get the people to think about a different kind of Bread. The Bread of life—God's provision for their spiritual sustenance and eternal well-being. This miracle of multiplication is actually a *type* of Christ. It is an illustration of a greater, deeper, more profound reality. Jesus wants these people to know, and He wants us to know, that He is the Source of Life.

Yes, He is omnipotent. He can defy the laws of nature in order to meet our physical needs. Yes, He can do amazing miracles which provide for our practical, daily necessities and which demonstrate His care and compassion. But that is not His ultimate goal when He exercises His power. What He really wants is for us to partake of *Him*, to put our faith and confidence in *Him*, to give control of our lives to *Him*—so that He can impart His life to us—eternal life—and so we can live in peace and harmony with Him.

Please understand this miracle in that light. I've heard preachers use this miracle to talk about how you can expand your business and achieve financial prosperity and all kinds of things that have to do with our physical well-being. That is not what this miracle is about. It is to help us believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that if we eat of Him, the Bread of Life, we will have life in His name. And if we never come to the point where we partake of *Him* and have life in His name, then none of the other things really matter.

Some of us in our church have some very real and pressing needs—physical needs. Jesus cares about those needs. But Jesus is not *only* concerned about those needs. He is concerned about spiritual, eternal realities. So, if you are out of work and you are praying for a job, pray that God would provide a job where Jesus' eternal purposes can be accomplished in you and through you. If you don't have enough money to make ends meet, go ahead and pray that God will help you make ends meet, but pray for God's eternal purposes to be accomplished in it—that Jesus would be revealed and that Jesus would be trusted. If you've got some physical infirmity, go ahead and pray that God would heal you, but pray that God's eternal purposes will be accomplished in the process, which is far more important and far more consequential than your physical well-being.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are perhaps some who are here today or some who are watching this message on YouTube who have not yet put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. I assure you, He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He is God's provision for you. He is not a means to get God to do something for you, like provide for your needs. He, *Himself*, is God's provision. He is the Bread of Life, and when you partake of Him, you have eternal life.

## Little Becomes a Lot Matthew 14:13-21

Main Idea: ***Little becomes a lot when Jesus is in it***

Jesus seeks some privacy (13)

He travels by boat to a secluded place

He is followed on foot by crowds from the towns

Jesus has compassion on the crowd and heals the sick (14)

The disciples try to send the crowd away (15)

It is evening and they are hungry

It is a remote place and there is no food

Jesus tells the disciples to feed the crowd (16-18)

He says the crowd does not need to leave

They say they merely have five loaves and two fish

He asks them to bring the loaves and fish to him

Jesus prepares to feed the crowd (19)

He orders them to sit on the grass

He blesses the food

He breaks the loaves of bread

He gives it to his disciples to distribute

Jesus performs a miracle (20-21)

Everyone eats until satisfied

The disciples collect twelve baskets of leftovers

The crowd consists of several thousand