

The Miraculous Feeding

Matt. 14:13-21

Intro. Last week we enjoyed a wonderful Missions Conference and heard testimonies from some terrific young missionaries. I want for us to say “thank you” to Dan Neumann and members of our Missions Committee who invested so much time and energy to make our conference a success.

Now this AM, there’s something we need to come to terms with. Our missionaries and we ourselves cannot in our own strength do what Christ has called us to do. We are hopelessly inadequate to advance the Gospel and bring souls into Christ’s Kingdom. We see this illustrated by the story in **Matt. 14:13-21**. We read this passage a few moments ago, but let’s ask God to open our eyes to the lessons He wants us to learn from these verses. **PRAY**

1. The message in the setting - Before we get into the story itself, I want you to sense God’s heart as Jesus reveals it to us here. In the end of **chap.12**, the religious leaders accused Jesus of performing miracles in the power of the devil. Hostility against Him was increasing and the Jews were already conspiring to kill Him. In **chap.13** the leaders at Nazareth accused Him of performing miracles in the devil’s power. Then early in **chap. 14**, Jesus was told John the Baptist was beheaded by an order from King Herod. The Lord’s ordained forerunner / prophet / and partner to Christ’s ministry was martyred in a barbaric way. **14:13** says, **When Jesus heard what had happened, He withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.** Mark says Jesus and His disciples crossed the Lake to some desolate point on the north eastern shore.

Did Jesus cross the lake because He was afraid Herod would come after Him next? Did He angrily withdraw to plan a counter attack? Was He dejected and depressed by all the rejection? Any of these reactions might characterize your response or mine. But this isn’t why Jesus **withdrew**. He **withdrew** from Capernaum to escape the crowds and have some time alone with His Father and His disciples. Despite the hostility, Jesus was never afraid for His life. Unlike us, Jesus had total control over His life as well as His death. Speaking about His life in **Jn.10:18** He said, **No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.** Though Jesus may have left that area to avoid a premature confrontation with Herod, it seems more likely that he wanted to honor John by explaining the meaning of John’s life and death to His disciples. Even though Jesus is fully God, He is also fully man. He felt sorrow / hunger / thirst / exhaustion / and pain. Being fully human, there were times when He was drained physically and emotionally...times when He needed to rest and be refreshed. This is the wonder of the incarnation. God really became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ.

We’re not told how much time Jesus spent in this **solitary place**. His retreat must have been brief because **v.13** says, **the crowds followed him on foot from the towns.** They saw Jesus and His disciples get into a boat and sail not far from shore in an easterly direction. Where He was headed had nothing to sustain life. So **v.14** says, **When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them and healed their sick.** Jesus wasn’t annoyed by the crowd. His compassion proves He didn’t retreat to load his guns / to brood / or allow bitterness to intensify. He didn’t return determined to have nothing more to do with the Israel’s leaders and Galilee’s unbelievers. Though heartsick over John’s execution, He withdrew to that **solitary place** to show us how we should respond when men do their worst and how we need to regularly be refilled with the Father’s love. So when Jesus saw the crowd, unconditional love welled up in Him. He knew most of this crowd had come selfishly for what they could get from Him. But that made no difference to Him...Jesus **had compassion on them** anyway. **He healed their sick.**

I won’t speak for you, but I can be quick to write off people who don’t agree with me...people who don’t like me...people react to the Gospel. My fuse can be short and my patience even shorter.

Like the disciples, there are moments when I want to call down fire. Don't you? But it isn't that way with Jesus...it isn't that way with God. His grace is forever greater than our sinfulness! As Paul prayed in **Eph. 3:17-19** God's love defies measurement! It's wider / longer / higher / and deeper than our greatest estimates. This patient compassion of Jesus is astounding in a world of discord and division where we pick and choose who to love! Jesus loves the unlovely. He loves the morally bankrupt as well as the unbelieving skeptic. He even has compassion for those who come to be entertained or to get what they can from Him. He loves because God is love. Our love is so unlike His! The heart of God was put on display by the compassion of Jesus. And none of us have arrived in the pursuit of Christlikeness until our hearts are changed to be like our Father's heart. That's a long way from here.

2. The miracle in the feeding - The unique importance of this story is proved by the fact that along with the resurrection it is the only miracle recorded by all four Gospel writers...Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Later Jesus referred to it at least 3 x's. We'll see why the miracle is so important, but I'm thinking it must contain a lesson God doesn't want us to miss.

Now unbelieving skeptics maintain that Jesus didn't and couldn't have multiplied 5 loaves and 2 fishes to feed a crowd of 5,000. I have to agree with them on one point. Jesus didn't feed 5,000! According to **v.21**, the head count didn't include the women and children! The total count may have been as high as 20,000! But skeptics deny this miracle because it's too spectacular for their tastes! If Jesus actually did such a miracle...and they insist He didn't...it would be a 'Grade A' miracle of creation. And if Jesus performed miracles of creation, He would have to be God, the Creator. But the skeptic has already decided there's no such thing as a Divine Creator and Jesus certainly isn't Him.

Listen carefully...if the **Gen. 1** account of creation is too hard for you to believe, you will have difficulty with the rest of the Bible! **Gen.1:1** says **In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.** It is imperative for us to believe every word in the Bible's opening sentence. To disbelieve or deny any part of **Gen. 1:1** is to cast doubt on every claim that follows from Genesis to Revelation.

To explain what "*really*" happened, skeptics say Jesus merely encouraged the crowd to share the food they had tucked away in their back packs. It was still a miracle to get 5,000 selfish people to share lunch with their neighbors! But the facts as presented in the text disallow that idea...especially when the other Gospels accounts are compared. The fact is...the crowd had nothing to eat...nothing! When the disciples surveyed the situation, they found only one small lunch. And what the boy had was comparable to a "Lunchable." He had **5 small barley loaves** and **two small fish**. John may have been the disciple with the best appetite because he's the only one to say the loaves and fishes were **small**. (**Jn. 6:9**) But after taking inventory, this was all they found. The word translated **small barley loaves** refers to something more like a granola bar than a loaf of bread. The **two small fish** were probably the size of a sardine or herring. Imagine how hopeless the situation was.

In **vs.15** and **16** the disciples said to Jesus, "**This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.**" Jesus replied, "**They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.**" Right about now the disciples are thinking, "*OK, we'll get right on it. The place is desolate and uninhabited. There are no grocery stores, party stores or fast food chains. Eric Balance and Arby's are no where to be found.*" The financial manager of the team then spoke up to add his two cents. He says, "*even if there was a Kroger nearby, "feeding this many people would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much money on bread and give it to them to eat?"*" (**Mk. 6:37**) "*Listen Jesus ...with all due respect, this is mission impossible! We've got 5 granola bars and 2 sardines, yet you're asking us to feed 5,000 to 20,000 hungry people! It can't be done! Look at that crowd. We can't do it. In fact, we don't know anyone who could do such a thing.*" It's important to grasp the hopelessness of this scenario because it's the key to understanding the lesson Jesus wants us to learn.

If you lived through the Great Depression or ever had more mouth than money, you may know what it means to “add water to the soup.” But this crisis was beyond ridiculous! Because 5 loaves and 2 fish was so ridiculously inadequate, the disciples said, **“how far will (lunch for one kid) go among so many?”** Now if, as the skeptic says...the food was in the people’s back-packs, why would the disciples say, **“Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”** – Mk. 6:36. And why as Jn. 6:5 says, did Jesus ask Philip, **“Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?”** Why would conversation even come up about buying food if the people already had what was needed? So, “NO!” The theory offered by the skeptic is hopelessly flawed! Like so many attempts to deny the supernatural, the details of the story don’t support their denial. That evening Jesus performed a miracle of creation and the text allows no other reasonable explanation!

Along with the plain meaning of the words, Jn. 6:14 says, **After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”** The fact that Jesus fed this crowd with 12 baskets full of leftovers, is described as a **semion**, a **miraculous sign** from God. Having seen this **miraculous sign**, the people said, **“Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.”** Why would the crowd say this if the event was little more than a colossal pot-luck supper? Here’s how the crowd reacted to what actually happened. What Jesus did reminded them of Moses and the manna God provided in the wilderness. Some probably thought of the Prophet Elisha who after feeding 100 hungry men with 20 barley loaves, had bread to spare. (II Kings 4:42-44) They reasoned Jesus must be in the same category with Moses and Elisha! The word that spread through the crowd was this...**“Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world...”** the One Moses promised would come.

But let’s think about the miracle itself. Jn. 6:14 says the miracle was a **semion...a miraculous sign**. Jn. 20:30, 31 say, **Jesus did many other miraculous signs (semion) in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** Notice why the Lord recorded these **miraculous signs**. The verse continues...**these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing you may have life in his name.** Satan doesn’t want people to believe in the name of Jesus. He doesn’t want God to be glorified by people He saves. So what does Satan do? What is his strategy? He plants doubt in men’s minds. He inspires teachers to discredit the miracles Jesus performed. The skeptic doesn’t realize what’s happening, but he/she has played right into Satan’s schemes.

But let’s get back to the miracle. Other theories are offered, but the text seems to say the **barley loaves** and **small fish** were multiplied or created in the hands of Jesus. The miracle didn’t happen in the disciple’s hands or in the baskets. vs.19 says, **Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.** By the way, don’t you wonder how many disciples were looking around while Jesus was praying? Like kids around an empty Christmas tree on Christmas Eve, they’re wondering, “Where will the stuff come from?” But like the flour and oil that never rain out in Elijah’s day, in the hands of Jesus, the supply of bread and fish was endless. Like endless shrimp at Red Lobster, Jesus kept bringing it.

The miracle here was similar to the water Jesus turned to wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Jn. 2:11 says that was the first **miraculous sign** Jesus performed. In both miracles of creation Jesus bypassed every historical process involved to make wine / bake bread / or produce fish. He created wine ready to drink / bread ready to be eaten / and fish already dried, salted and ready to be consumed. The wine was never grapes hanging on a vine or squeezed in a press. The bread was never barley growing in a field, harvested, ground in a mill or baked in an oven.

The fish never hatched from eggs or swam in the waters of Galilee. These newly created fish were never caught in a fisherman's net or sold at a market. Jesus bypassed normal processes and created wine ready to drink and food ready to eat. And God had his men record the miracle 4 x's so we'd be sure not to miss it. Contrary to the skeptic's claims, Jesus performed a "Grade A" miracle of creation ...a miracle completely outside the realm of human ability. Do you know why Jesus did this and what makes this miracle so important? As a **miraculous sign**, Jesus proved He is the same Creator we're introduced to in **Gen. 1**. He's the same Creator who on the third day caused trees and plants with ripe fruit ready to be eaten. Then just two literal 24 hour days later, this Creator God created all sorts of animals. Because these animals were created with an appetite and an immediate need for food, built in genetic information prompted them not to eat each other, but to eat the fruits and vegetables God provided two days earlier. In other words, as God, Jesus created fully developed organisms...like ripe apples and trees with growth rings already in them. He created a fully functioning universe with the appearance of age built in. If there was a Big Bang, it was the bang God got out of speaking the world into existence! **Heb. 11:3 - By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.** In every instance, God's Word spoke into existence mature organisms and human beings...not primitive, infantile or evolving organisms in various stages of development.

When the biblical data is carefully considered, the way Jesus created these food items supports our belief in a young earth, not an earth with life forms that took billions and billions of years to evolve. God literally spoke a mature heavens and earth into existence. **Psa. 33:8, 9 - Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere Him. For He spoke, and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm.** We can't agree with those who deny the supernatural in search of a more palatable and politically correct explanation for the origin of life! The Bible says, **In the beginning, God created...** Then, about 4,000 years later, Jesus came to earth demonstrating that He is God with wisdom and power to create complex things from nothing.

I had some fun sitting on the ordination council for Bob and Barb Smith's grandson, Aaron. After Aaron declared his confidence in a literal 6 day creation and a young earth, a pastor asked him an interesting question. The pastor said, *"I know a guy who believes in Christ but doesn't believe in a young earth or literal six day creation...can a guy like that be saved?"* As Aaron was contemplating an answer, we felt his pain and tried to help him out... So I said, *"Yes, a guy who believes that way can be saved, but it will take billions and billions of years."* You see the fact is, if we deny the special creation of **Gen.1** which the Bible says God accomplished in moments not millennia...we also call into question the miracle of the new birth. Why is that?... Because the new birth which is results in a new creation, is a miracle that happens in a moment. This miraculous work of God happens the moment a sinner trusts Christ to save them. Jesus said, **"You must be born again."** He didn't say, you must evolve or morph over time to a higher level of spiritual consciousness. So, don't minimize the miracle or let anyone dissuade you from trusting the miracle working power of Jesus Christ. For the One who created the universe with a word, it was a small thing for Jesus to create bread and fish to feed 5,000 plus with 12 baskets of leftovers! After all, in the wilderness the Lord fed 1.5 to 2 million people for 40 years! But we come now to the part of our study that contains some vital lessons.

3. The method in the serving - As we've said previously, **chap. 14** marks a turning point in Christ's ministry. At this point Jesus turned from addressing the crowds to privately teaching His disciples. He was now preparing them for the time when He would be taken from them. In keeping with His purpose, the feeding of the 5,000 became the platform for some essential lessons. In **chap.13** Jesus is the Sower who goes into the world sowing the seed of His Word. In other passages Jesus is the Good Shepherd who came to seek and save the lost...and to lead and to feed His people. But in a short time, these duties and titles would be handed over to His disciples. Ultimately the apostles would pass them along to under-shepherds and to every believer.

So here Jesus used this miraculous feeding to present seven lessons about how Gospel ministry is to be done.

1. v.14 - "He had compassion on them" – Gospel ministry of every kind, whether it's street evangelism or SS teaching, begins with and is based on God's love poured into our hearts. In **II Cor. 5:14** Paul tells what motivated his ministry. He wrote, **For Christ's love compels us...** Jesus had compassion, but the only solution the disciples could imagine was to send the people away. They didn't have the love of God. They weren't yet convinced that Jesus can supply whatever is needed. But out of His heart of mercy and compassion Jesus refused to send them away. Do we see people the way Jesus does? Do we love only lovely like us, or does our love extend to every person in need? Serving others begins as we learn to love others the way God loves us.

2. v.16 - "You give them something to eat" – In these words, the Great Shepherd delegates responsibility to His under-shepherds...His disciples. *"You feed them. You serve them."* In just a short time, Jesus would commission every believer with these words, **"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** – **Matt. 28:19, 20** By His feeding of the 5,000 we see the method of evangelism and true Christian service. We see the strategy for fulfilling Christ's command...a responsibility entrusted to every believer...*"You feed them."* Do you believe Jesus can use you to bring spiritual nourishment and life to others who are without Him? He can.

3. v.17 - "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish" - The disciples here confessed the utter impossibility of the task they were asked to perform. Like so many before them, they said, *"We can't do it!"* They had no resources to feed 5,000 people! They were like Gideon who faced a massive army of Midianites with only 300 men or like David who faced the giant Goliath with just a sling and 5 stones. And just like those first disciples, we are bankrupt when it comes to the spiritual resources needed for a ministry that produces eternal fruit. In the flesh we can attract people and do many things for them. But eternal good can only be accomplished by the supply of God's Spirit working in us and through us. In **Jn. 6:63** Jesus said, **The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing.** Then in the parable of the vine, Jesus said, **apart from me you can do nothing.** - **Jn. 15:5b** So, in the matter of serving others for eternal good, it is not possible to do what Christ has commanded us to do in our own strength and with available resources.

4. v.18 - "Bring them here to me" – This command speaks of consecration or the dedication of all we have to Christ. As many have observed, *"Little becomes much when placed in Christ's hands."* We can't surrender what we don't have, but all we have must be given back to Him. This is **Rom. 12:1 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship.** God's work advances through the efforts of people who are first committed to Him. Have you given your life and your possessions to Jesus who gave them to you? Martin Luther said, *"I have held many things in my hands, and I have lost them all; but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess."* Surrendering our lives to Christ is something we must do every day...not just one time in an inspiring meeting or mystical moment. Each day we must pray, *"Here I am Lord, use me. I give myself to You. It isn't much, but I place my life in your hands so You might fulfill your plan and purposes in and through me."* Do you pray that way? I've tried to make this prayer a morning habit.

5. v.19a - Then He gave them to the disciples – This is the stage where the miracle takes place. It's the stage when Jesus gives His disciples something only He can provide. Paul confessed how utterly incompetent he was for God's work in **II Cor. 3:5, 6 - Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.**

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant. God gives grace to those who humble themselves and confess they are powerless to do what He asks them to do. Admitting our inadequacy, we then surrender ourselves to Christ to do His will. Then as a miracle of grace, He infuses our lives with His love and power. This is the process that makes ministry supernatural. God pours His love into our hearts. He ignites our passion to see people saved and matured. He gives us wisdom we don't naturally possess. His Spirit energizes our words and our works. He supplies the grace needed to endure when trials come. And then at the end of the day, He will actually reward us for what He accomplished in and through our lives. This is how God's grace enables us to serve others. The way Jesus equipped His disciples to feed this hungry crowd is the prototype of true ministry. And listen...when we've done our best and given all we have to give, 12 baskets of grace are left over! There was one basket for each disciple to carry home to remind him that the grace of Jesus is always sufficient with more to spare. Jesus Christ has everything the 12 tribes of Israel need. In fact, as the bread of life, He is what the whole world needs.

6. v.19 - ...and the disciples gave them to the people – This is where our human energies and efforts converge with His supernatural supply. We place our lives and talents in Christ's hands. He then gives us what we need to serve others. It always works in this order. We give what we have to Him – Christ fills our lives – we give away what He supplies – then we come back to Him and He fills us again. We see this in relation to spiritual comfort in **II Cor. 11:3, 4 - Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we our-selves have received from God.** This principle applies in the matter of Christian stewardship and giving. God gives to us so we have what we need and with some more to give to others. When we surrender our lives to Christ, He responds by placing in our hands the resources we need to serve others. So in the final analysis, what we say and do for them comes from Him. Remember, He is the One who builds His church and apart from Him we can do nothing.

7. v.20 - They all ate and were satisfied – Perhaps as many as 20,000 people were fed that evening. This was truly a "Guess who's coming for dinner" event! There have been a few times when until the last minute I neglected to tell Peggy I invited guests for dinner. I say "only a few times" because I really don't like sleeping in the garage. But what an astounding meal this was! It was a miracle meal. Jesus had His disciples seat the people on the green grass in groups of hundreds and fifties. (**Mk. 6:39, 40; Lk. 9:14**). All this is reminiscent of **Psa. 23:2,3** and the way a shepherd tends and cares for his sheep. It's also reminds us of the Last Supper Jesus provided for His disciples and the Marriage supper of the Lamb yet to come. Seated around our Shepherd will be people from **every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev. 5:9)** Together all who believed His word and received His grace will sing, "**Worthy is the Lamb.**"

I love the way Hosea described the way God delivered His people from Egypt and provided for their needs. **Hos. 11:4 - I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them.** Jesus has done this for so many of us. Has He done this for you? He wants to be your savior, your shepherd, your provider. Though He wants to be all this for you, He waits for your response.