

## **“Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand”**

**Luke 9:10-17**

### **LXVI. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke**

Consider the nominal “believer” or the unbeliever who is giving a measure of consideration to the claims of Christ. He hesitates. He is reluctant to surrender his life completely to Christ. His major obstacle? He doubts that Jesus can meet his “needs.” He has his loves, his passions, his desires. He knows that some of them are illicit and he is loath to relinquish them. Others are permitted but indulged in idolatrous proportions. Can he, the nominal “believer” or the unbeliever ever be satisfied, ever be fulfilled as a disciple of Christ? Would the landscape always be gray? Would the future forever be dull?

Jesus’ feeding of the 5000 is what the commentators have called “a great acted parable of the glorious gospel.”<sup>1</sup> It is the one miracle that is recorded in all four gospels. John calls it a “sign” (Jn 6:14). Of what is it a sign? It signifies who Jesus is and what He is able to do. Call it a “visual aid” making visible the spiritual truths of the gospel. It illustrates, says Morris, “the truth that God in Christ can supply any need.”<sup>2</sup> Put simply, this enacted parable portrays the truth that Jesus is the “bread of life,” that whoever comes to Him “shall not hunger,” and whoever believes in Him “shall never thirst” (Jn 6:35). How is he able to do this? Because through Him we are reconciled or restored to our Creator. The background is the fundamental reality of the creation and fall. We were made to know God and live in constant dependence upon Him. This is our

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<sup>1</sup> Ryle, I, 302; Milne, 129.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 166.

nature, in the same way it is the nature of automobiles to depend on gasoline in order to function. It is how we are made. What the fall and sin ruined, Jesus restores. He reconnects us with our Maker in whom alone we can find meaning, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Our true hungers (as opposed to our superficial appetites) are satisfied and our true thirsts (over against our surface desires) are quenched as we place our faith in Him. Moreover, this he does not slightly or barely or just adequately, but lavishly.

### **Jesus is accessible**

The first thing we notice in this account of the feeding of the 5000 is that Jesus welcomes the crowd, that He is *accessible*. There is no reluctance on His part to meet the needs of fallen humanity.

*On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. (Lk 9:10)*

The apostles are returning from the mission on which He sent them about which we read in verses 1-9. Bethsaida, on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee, is about 80 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Luke's meaning must be that they went to that general vicinity, not the city itself, since they were in a "desolate place" (v 12). The point of going there was to withdraw, to retreat, to rest for a season from active ministry. However, that intention was thwarted by the pursuing crowds.

*When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. (Lk 9:11)*

Word got out of the location of Jesus and the disciples and the multitude joined them. Luke says that Jesus “welcomed” them. He was not irritated by the appearance of the crowd, though He was seeking privacy. He’s not frustrated by their intrusion, though time for rest is legitimate and necessary. He doesn’t say, “Can you come back tomorrow? I need a little time of quiet and reflection with my disciples,” though this would have been a reasonable thing to insist upon. He welcomed “them,” the crowd, the mixed multitude, made up of all types of people: the religious and irreligious, the worthy and the unworthy, the moral and the immoral. He received them, and taught them about the “kingdom of God” and He cured those in need of healing.

Jesus is not like the unapproachable Persian King Ahasuerus, who if one appeared uninvited in the inner court one might be put to death unless the king held out his golden scepter (Esth 4:11). Jesus is the golden scepter of the Father. We always are invited and always are welcome. Jesus says “come” to the “weary and heavy-laden.” There are no prior obligations that he demands we fulfill. There are no preliminary duties that he requires we perform. Come and “learn of Me.” This is all He asks (Mt 11:26-30). Jesus says “come” to tax-gatherers and sinners, to collaborators and traitors, to prostitutes and drunks (Lk 5:30,31; 7:36-50). Jesus says “come” to the spiritually sick and the spiritually dead and calls them to repentance (Lk 7:1-17). He is accessible to all manner of sinners, whatever their perversion, their lifestyle, their habits, who

will heed the call of God's kingdom to repent and believe. We can turn to Him and know that He will receive us eagerly. He is accessible.

### **Humanity is destitute**

*Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place." (Lk 9:12)*

The commentators tend to criticize the apostles for their lack of faith in Jesus' ability to provide for the crowd, given that they had seen Him calm a storm and raise the dead (8:22ff; 8:49ff), not to mention their impertinence in instructing Jesus on how to deal with it.<sup>3</sup> Yet consider the circumstances. The place where they have gathered is desolate, and we learn from verse 13 that there are no more than "five loaves and two fish" amongst 5000. Their resources are wholly inadequate.

The crowd is a picture of a needy humanity. There are several perspectives from which we might view fallen humanity. One might be to emphasize its culpable depravity, its guilt, its corruption, its perversion, its rebellion. This is the outlook typically taken when discussing Nazis, rapist, child molesters, drug-pushers, and pornographers. However, another perspective is that of humanity as needy. This is the perspective indicated by the circumstances of the crowd. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at this multitude and had compassion on them, seeing them as "sheep

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<sup>3</sup> "Perhaps this unintended impertinence in taking the initiative and telling Christ what to do was the result of a sense of power and authority induced in them by the success of their recent mission" (Gooding, 161).

without a shepherd” (Mk 6:34). Jesus’ response to the crowd was not disgust but sympathy. Shepherdless sheep are defenseless. They wander aimlessly. They need direction. They need protection. They fall prey to what Jesus called “thieves and robbers” who kill, steal, and destroy (Jn 6:8-10). They are abandoned by “hired hands” who flee in the face of danger and “care nothing for the sheep” (Jn 6:11-13). They need to be led to green pastures so they can eat and be led to still waters so that they can drink (Ps 23:2). The resources of the multitude are utterly inadequate for the need.

We can see nearly everywhere the vulnerable and exploited condition of fallen humanity. *Celebrities* glamorize lifestyles of promiscuity and excess, and the sheep follow. *Advertisers* promise popularity and excitement and fulfillment through the use of their products, and the sheep follow. *False religions* promise peace and contentment through their rituals and practices and teachings, and the sheep follow. *Politicians* promise utopia through their programs and government provisions and multitudes place their hopes in them. Everywhere the dominant message is that happiness is to be found in the wealth that makes possession of expensive cars, big houses, limitless wardrobes, wild parties, and exciting vacations possible. Everywhere the sheep blindly embrace this lie and pursue fulfillment in material things and skin-deep pleasures in defiance of God’s laws. Nowhere are the celebrities, advertisers, religionists, politicians, hedonists, and materialists able to deliver what they promise. Peace proves elusive. Happiness proves evasive. People wander from one thing to another, groping for fulfillment, for meaning, for satisfaction. They remain hungry. The world’s meager resources prove inadequate. False shepherds, hirelings, thieves, and robbers mislead them.

How are we to view the sheep/people? Not with disgust, but like Jesus, with compassion; as sheep without a shepherd; as destitute and in what the twelve describe as a “desolate” or desert place, hungry and in need of food and lodging; as exploited by greedy agents of evil. This is the human condition. Do we know this about ourselves? We are hungry and our environment is a desert. It cannot provide what we need. It cannot satisfy our hunger or quench our thirst. All its pleasures are mirages, “passing pleasures,” momentary relief followed by even greater despair and emptiness.

### **Flawed helpers**

Jesus’ feeding of the multitude provides a picture of the power of His gospel. He might have snapped his fingers and a plate of food might have appeared before each member of the crowd. Instead Jesus is pleased to enlist the help of flawed disciples in displaying His power and distributing His benefits.

*But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” (Lk 9:13)*

Jesus tells them, “You feed them.” This command should have gotten them thinking about Jesus’ powers and what He could do through them. They might have responded, “Show us how” or “Provide us with the resources and we will.” Instead, they thought only of their own limitations.

How could *they* feed them? They had no food and no money (Lk 9:3). Philip pointed out that 200 denarii, a year's wages, would be insufficient (Jn 6:7). John tells us that the loaves were barley loaves, the food of the poor, that a small boy had brought (Jn 6:9). That's all they had.

Yet Jesus is undeterred. He will feed the multitudes, and do so through His disciples.

*For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, and had them all sit down. (Lk 9:14,15)*

They were seated in groups of 50, probably for convenience in serving.

*And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. (Lk 9:16)*

Some have read sacramental meaning into Jesus' taking of the bread, blessing, breaking, and giving it to the disciples. Yet Jesus' actions, says Green, are merely "those expected at any meal among pious Jews."<sup>4</sup> That Jesus "said a blessing" does not mean that Jesus imparted a blessing upon physical objects. The meaning is that Jesus said a prayer of thanksgiving. Then he gave the broken loaves "to the disciples."

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<sup>4</sup> Green, 364. Green also points out that Luke-Acts "is surprisingly uninterested in what ecclesiastical tradition would come to refer to as the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper" (365, note 36).

What role do the disciples play in the feeding? They “set” the loaves “before the crowd.” Jesus uses them. He doesn’t feed the crowd directly. He uses what they have. They were able to secure but five loaves and two fish. Their resources were meager, as in one sense, they always are. Yet Jesus uses the disciples with their sparse provisions to feed a multitude of 5000 men, plus however many women and children were present. This is a picture of gospel ministry. The disciples were twelve different men. Peter, John, Thomas, Judas, to name four, were temperamentally different. Their personalities were different. Their gifts were different. Yet they were all used, Thomas the doubter, Peter the denier, even Judas at this point, to feed the multitude. God uses a variety of people. Don’t stereotype those whom God uses. Some are shy. Some are outgoing. Some are eloquent. Some speak haltingly. Some have brilliant minds and average personalities. Some have average minds and brilliant personalities. Some have great wells of compassion. Some have deep spiritual insights. *God takes what we have and He uses it.* Our role is to be conduits for His spiritual food. We offer His bread to the hungry masses. Our job is simple: set before the people the benefits of Christ. We offer the bread of life to a hungry world and watch God multiply the loaves. Do not avoid ministry because you think you are ungifted, or undergifted. The most important factors in gospel ministry by far are availability and willingness. The disciples are both. Be available to be used. Be willing, and God will use you.

### **Abundance**

Finally, we return to the issue we raised at the outset. Are the fears of the nominal believer or non-believer legitimate? Can Jesus meet their needs?



*And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. (Lk 9:17)*

They ate, “and were satisfied.” This is the same word used in Luke 6:21 and Matthew 5:6 for those who hunger after righteousness (*chartazō*). The meal was a visual aid helping us to understand the gospel. So are the leftovers. Jesus is able to *satisfy* their hunger, and not just barely. The 12 baskets of broken pieces underscore “the magnitude of the miracle together with the superabundance of God’s good gifts,” explains Green.<sup>5</sup>

Notice what is missing in this meal: the distinction to clean and unclean, any mention of water for washing in preparation for eating, or proper food preparation. Green sees this lack “extraordinary,” and understands the point of their absence as underscoring the message that “God’s benefaction is without limits.”<sup>6</sup> The benefits of the new covenant, of Jesus’ ministry, of the cross come to us apart from the ceremonial and cleansing ordinances of the Old Testament. His blood is a better cleanser than water! Gospel benefits come to us apart from the Law.

The physical feeding portrays visibly what Jesus is able to do for our souls. He is able to satisfy us with the fullness of Himself. He is the Bread of Life (Jn 6:35). He takes away the hunger of the soul. He doesn’t do this slightly. He satisfies and more than satisfies. Knowing Jesus, and with Him the forgiveness of our sins, reconciliation with our Maker, adoption into the family of

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<sup>5</sup> Green, 366.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

God, His gifts of peace, contentment, and a joy that is inexpressible and full of glory, brings more psychological, emotional, spiritual satisfaction than anything in this world. “If anyone thirst,” says Jesus, “let him come to Me and drink” (Jn 7:37).

One might say, “I can’t see it. What you describe can’t compete with the pleasures of partying,” or of “success,” or “wealth,” or “popularity,” or whatever. The key is trust. Believe that He can. Jesus changes us. By addressing the true needs of our souls, He transforms our desires, our loves, our passions, our wants. Once we loved the darkness and hated the light. Now the opposite is true. Now we love the light and hate the darkness (Jn 3:19-21). Now our loves and desires are aligned with what we were created to be, even with what we were designed to be. Now we rejoice not in unrighteousness but rejoice in the truth (3 Jn 1:3). Now we abhor what is evil and cling to what is good (Rom 12:9, NASB).

Jesus is the answer to the fundamental needs of the world. Hedonism isn’t. Materialism isn’t. Politics isn’t. The world’s “isms” are all stuck in the external and superficial. They don’t touch the deeper, internal, more vital, more fundamental spiritual needs of our souls. These Jesus, and only Jesus, is able to meet.