

“A Great Combination”

Matthew 14:13-21

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A popular poem says, *Over twenty centuries have come and gone And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that have ever marched All the navies that have ever sailed All the Kings that ever reigned put together Have not affected the life of mankind on earth As powerfully as that one solitary life.* Friends, as we go through the Gospel of Matthew, we are frequently reminded of what an amazing, wonderful, unforgettable man Jesus was. One of the stories that all four gospel writers include is the time Jesus fed a crowd of over 5000 people. Our text today is Matthew 14:13-21. As we explore this passage of God’s Word, I want the Lord to help us see more clearly who Jesus was and is, and that we will have a fresh understanding what this means for our lives today. Let’s pause and pray that will happen.

The feeding of the 5000. Listen as Matthew tells how Jesus feeds a hungry crowd. **Matthew 14:13,14 Now when Jesus heard this** (about the execution of John the Baptist, which we looked at on March 8th) **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. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.**

Notice that, apparently because Jesus was human as well as divine, He sometimes wanted privacy. Herod’s sudden interest in Jesus’ ministry maybe concerned Him. He wanted to get away from the people for a while and all the demands they put on Him. But when the crowd finds Him, Jesus is not angry. Instead, He has compassion on these folks and helps those who are sick.

Matthew 14:15 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.” As afternoon wore on, the disciples realized they were facing a significant problem. There is a huge group of people and there doesn’t seem to be any food around. Everyone is likely getting hungry and the disciples have a very practical solution. It is time to end the

meeting and dismiss the folks so they can go find their own food.

Matthew 14:16 But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

Now, I wonder if He might have messing with the disciples a little. He knew they did not have the ability to feed the crowd, and as John 6:6 tells us, Jesus already had in mind what He was going to do to feed everyone.

John’s account gives us a few more details about the conversation. In response to Jesus’ suggestion that they provide food for the crowd, the disciple Philip responds, John 6:7 “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” In those days that was eight months’ worth of wages, and it would be enough for just a snack for each one in the crowd. Jesus asks how much food they have **and John 6:8,9 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”**

Almost nothing. But Jesus says, (back to Matthew’s account) **Matthew 14: 18b, 19 “Bring them here to me.” 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 seems to have a very organized plan, and it works. **Matthew 14:20 And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.** Matthew then gives us numbers. **Matthew 14:21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.**

Because of Jewish customs, since they were in public, the men would have almost certainly eaten separately from the women and children. Thus, if 5000 men were fed, the total crowd, with women and children was about 15,000 people. So, we could refer to this as the story of the feeding of the 15,000, but I doubt that will catch on.

Well, this is a remarkable story. So remarkable, in fact, that many folks ask, "Did this really happen?" Liberal religious teachers have suggested what really occurred was that the boy's willingness to share his lunch inspired others in the crowd to do the same. So, when everyone shared their food and ate only what they needed, there were 12 baskets left over. Thus, the big lesson then would be that we should share what we have with those in need.

Now that is a fine idea, but it is not what the story is about, because it is not what happened. All four gospels, the only four records we have of the event, tell us the same thing. Jesus fed about 15,000 people with only five loaves of bread and two small fish. Yes, our modern scientific perspective makes it hard for us to swallow this, but that is the only reason someone would suggest that the people simply shared their lunches that day.

Incidentally, recent studies provide additional evidence that something like this actually happened. In about 90 A.D. the Jewish historian Josephus, wrote about Jesus and reported he had performed "extraordinary deeds." Feeding 15,000 people with a little boy's lunch would certainly fall into that category. However, for decades skeptics insisted Josephus didn't really write this. If he believed Jesus performed miracles, wouldn't he have converted to Christianity, which he did not? Thus, Christians must have taken Josephus' writings and changed them, providing false testimony that Jesus was a miracle worker.

However, recent studies have concluded the word translated "extraordinary" (*paradoxa*) can also be rendered "strange" or "unexplainable," even "paranormal." This means that no, Josephus probably did not believe Jesus had performed miracles. But it also means Josephus really reported that Jesus did things that even his enemies could not explain, like the feeding of the 15,000. For those of us who believe the Bible, this doesn't really matter. But for folks who are skeptical, this provides evidence that the stories about Jesus are not just fiction or fables but are part of actual history.

Liberal religious teachers have often tried to remove the miracles from the gospels and provide naturalistic explanations for the different

miracles Jesus performed. They do this because they think this will make these stories easier to swallow for modern folks. Yet I think it is pretty obvious that if we eliminate miracles, we rob these stories of their power, and even their meaning. The Bible clearly teaches and I choose to believe that Jesus actually took a little boy's lunch and fed about 15,000 folks that day.

I think one of the main reasons the gospel writers report this event is that it clearly shows us two essential aspects of Jesus' character. These are two qualities that we usually don't think belong together, but in Jesus they are a magnificent combination.

First consider Jesus' compassion. Jesus loves people. He cares about them. We noted that earlier when we saw how, even when Jesus was seeking privacy, He would not turn down opportunities to heal and help people. Here, as He is busy teaching and ministering to a huge crowd, Jesus is still concerned about the very practical needs of the people around Him. He is thinking, "They are getting hungry. We need to get food for them to eat."

Pastors and other people involved in Christian ministry sometimes get so wrapped up in what they are doing that they don't really think about the people they are supposed to be serving. Sometimes, once in a while, my mind gets so preoccupied on Sunday mornings with the details of our worship service, that I become almost oblivious to you folks who are here.

That didn't happen with Jesus. He never forgot that people were the reason He was here on this planet. He said He had come to seek and save those who were lost (Luke 19:10). He met the needs people had.

I like the story of the man who fell into a pit and was unable to get out. A strict fundamentalist preacher came by and said, "I am sorry. You deserve to be where you are." A Buddhist monk came along and said, "You only think you are in a pit. You need to refocus your mind." A Pentecostal preacher said, "If you have enough faith, you can just speak the word, and you will be out of the pit." An optimist came by and said, "Cheer up. Things could be worse." A pessimist said, "Things will get worse." And IRS man came

along and asked if he had paid his taxes on the pit. And then came Jesus. Seeing the man, He took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

Folks, that story is fiction, but it is true. When Jesus encountered people who were struggling with guilt, He offered them forgiveness for their sin. When He met people who were crippled, He healed them so they could walk. Thus, which is with folks who are hungry, He gives them food. Whatever needs people have, physical or spiritual, Jesus devotes Himself to meeting those needs.

As Matthew continues his account of Jesus' ministry, we see there is no limit to His willingness to do this. The ultimate need of human beings is to find some way to be saved from the results of sin and eternal death. As human beings we need someone who will rescue us from our wretched condition of being separated from God and being without hope. And Jesus was willing to rescue us.

He was willing to give His own life as a sacrifice for us. On the cross He died the death we deserved to die. He suffered pain, agony, and the horrors of death itself for me and for you. He did this because it was the Father's will and also because of the great compassion, the great love He has for people. We catch a glimpse of that compassion in our text today.

Secondly, we see Jesus' power. In our world the compassionate often are not powerful and the powerful are often not compassionate. But Jesus is both. His power is obvious in our text today. He simply takes five loaves of bread and two fish and turns them into a meal for a huge crowd. Not only does everyone get something to eat, but there are leftovers.

How did He do it? I have no idea. There are no natural explanations. Some of you have added a little water to the soup so you could feed a couple of extra guests at dinner, but Jesus does something very different. It is a miracle. It is another demonstration of His supernatural power. Jesus had the power to do remarkable things.

So far, in Matthew, we have read how, by simply speaking to the wind and waves He was able to calm a storm. When that happened, His disciple

asked, "What kind of man is this even the winds and waves obey him." (8:27) It is amazing power.

Then He commands demons to come out of a man, and He casts them into a herd of pigs. His power threatens some of the folks who saw what happened and 8:34 says, "They pleaded with Him to leave their region." The He heals a paralyzed man so he can walk, He touches eyes of two blind men and all of a sudden, they can see, and then He enables a mute so speak.

He even walks into a house where a dead girl is lying on the bed, takes her hand and brings her back to life. Indeed, His power has no limits. He demonstrates this most clearly that first Easter morning when three days after being executed by the Romans, Jesus rises from the dead, conquering death itself.

Compassion and power. What does this amazing combination mean for us? What are the lessons God wants us to learn from this story? Well, first of all it helps explain why Jesus is the focal point of history. It helps us understand better why over 2000 years after His birth, billions of people continue to celebrate His time on earth. There has never been anyone else like Him, and there never will be. He is as **John 1:14b** says, **the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**

I think that if feeding the 15,000 was the only demonstration of Jesus' compassion and power, it, by itself, would be sufficient to make Him the greatest person who has ever lived. But it is only one of the many acts performed by Jesus. And it pales in comparison to His ultimate demonstration of compassion and power, which is His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

When we think about who Jesus is and about what He did, it is really no surprise that our calendars are based on His life. In fact, what really seems strange is that so many on this planet, even after hearing the story of Jesus, somehow think He can be ignored.

It baffles me that there are so many who believe the facts about Jesus' life recorded in the gospel, who believe He really did feed 15,000 people with a boy's lunch and yet somehow don't think He is

really that important. They think that getting the shopping done, cleaning the house, finishing a project at work, getting an “A” on the test, or watching a basketball game is what life is about.

But these things are *not* what life is about. Jesus is. He is the focal point, not only of history, not only of the calendar, but the focal point of life, of our lives.

Secondly, as we see Jesus’ compassion and power, it also shows us that we need to embrace Him as Savior and Lord. Jesus doesn’t desire that we spend one day a year celebrating His birth or resurrection. Rather we are to spend 365 days a year honoring Him.

The first step in doing this is trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. I am talking about something very different than just going to church, being spiritual, or being a nice person. As God’s Spirit enables, you need to turn away from trusting in yourself, turn to the Lord Jesus, and place your faith in Him.

If you have not done that, if you are not trusting in Jesus Christ, I encourage you to turn to Him today. If you are not sure if you are doing that or not sure what that means, please talk to me or one of the pastors. Only with Jesus as your Savior and Lord will you truly experience His compassion and power in your life.

Now, most of us here are already believers in Jesus Christ. Some of us have already followed Him for many years. What should our response be to what we read about Jesus? Well, we need to rejoice in His compassion and power. Friends, often we talk about what we should do to obey God. That is important. I think it would be appropriate to say that the compassion and power Jesus reveals in this story are good models for us to follow. Each of us should seek to show compassion to the people around us. As believers in Jesus, each of us should desire to see God’s power at work as we serve others. But remember, Christianity is rooted *in grace*.

The primary reason we come together is not to encourage each other to do wonderful things for God. There is nothing wrong with that, of course. Yet I believe the primary reason we should come together is to celebrate the marvelous things God

has done for us through Jesus Christ. Because ultimately, it is not about what we can do for God, but about what God has done, is doing, and will do for us through Jesus. What I suggest we do today is just stand back or sit back, in awe of Jesus Christ.

I was a small boy when I first heard the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 or 15,000. I remember wondering whether I would have been willing to give up my lunch to Jesus like that little boy was. Even then I valued my meals quite a bit. I am sure I heard the story many times during those early Sunday School years, but to be honest, since that time I have not really thought about it that often. Yet it is such a great story because it shows Jesus’ compassion and power so clearly.

Friends, this morning I feel like my words have been kind of feeble. But I hope God’s Spirit has sued them in your mind and heart to give you a fresh sense of the compassion and power that are found the Lord Jesus.

Friends, I encourage you today, this week, to rejoice in the compassion of Jesus Christ. Think about the great love He has for you. Think about His concern for every aspect of your life. Think about how when it seems no one else really cares or understands how you feel, Jesus always does. He is indeed the friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Or as the Hymn writer put it so well, (I love these words) *“Jesus! What a friend for sinners! Jesus, Lover of my soul. Friends may fail me, foes assail me, He, my Savior, makes me whole.”* And then this verse *Jesus, what a help in sorrow, while the billows over me roll. Even when my heart is breaking, He, my comfort, helps my soul.*

Friends, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, I invite you to simply bask in the marvelous compassion of Jesus. Then I encourage you to rejoice in the power of Jesus. No matter how difficult the challenge is that you face, no matter how many challenges there are, *nothing* is too hard for the Lord.

No, don’t fall into the trap of thinking that Jesus will perform miracles for you on demand. That is not what the Bible teaches. Rather you can be confident that the Lord desires not only what is

best for you but also has the ability to see that it becomes reality. If I had financial problems, it would be nice to have friends that were sympathetic and compassionate. Yet, what would really help is if my best friend was a billionaire.

Yet Jesus is able to do far more for us than Elon Musk. He has no limits. As **Psalm 115:3** says **Our God is in heaven, He does whatever He pleases.** Nothing is too difficult for Him. Oh, Christian friends, bask in the tremendous power of Jesus.

In **2 Corinthians 9:15**, as Paul concludes a discussion about God's generosity and grace, he says, **Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.** Or as the NLT puts it, **"Thank God for His gift too wonderful for words!"** Friends, I encourage you to do that today. Think about Jesus. Think about who He is. Think about His compassion and power in your life. And then "praise God for His gift too wonderful for words!"