

More Than Fish Sandwiches 4-3-05

Matthew 15:29-39 (NIV)

²⁹ Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. ³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. ³² Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way." ³³ His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" ³⁴ "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish." ³⁵ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. ³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸ The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children. ³⁹ After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

We are continuing our study through the Gospel of Matthew. In our last study, Jesus was in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon. We addressed that difficult conversation with the Canaanite woman. In that passage, we saw Jesus express something that seemed out of character for Him, and yet, it drew that Gentile woman to abandon her pride and worship Jesus. (Matthew 15:26) It is important for us to see the connection with this passage. In case we might come away thinking that Jesus was prejudiced, or did not value the lives of Gentiles as much as Jews, in the passage today, we see Him ministering specifically to Gentiles.

Commented [notes1]: ²⁶ He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." Matthew 15:26 (NIV)

Jesus had been in the Decapolis region once before. You might remember the demonic welcome committee that met Him. (Mark 5:2) That encounter ended with the man people had feared being delivered of demons and going out as a missionary to the Decapolis region. Mark writes that Jesus told him, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you." ²⁰ So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed. Mark 5:19-20 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: ² When Jesus got out of the boat, a man with an evil spirit came from the tombs to meet him. Mark 5:2 (NIV)

We can guess by the Greek descriptions of the feeding of the 5000 and that of the 4000 that this is about 2 to 6 months later. In the feeding of the 5000, there was grass to sit on, and in the feeding of the 4000 it had died off. It may be that the feeding of the 5000 was after spring rains and by the time the 4000 were fed, there was only bare ground. That gave the man who had been possessed time to prepare people for Jesus arrival. I think Satan must have thought he had won a great victory by keeping Jesus out of the Decapolis region. (Matthew 8:34) However, what looked at first like defeat was really just a preparation for an even greater work of God. The

Commented [notes3]: ³⁴ Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. Matthew 8:34 (NIV)

same is often true in our lives! We wonder why the enemy seems to go unchecked only to later find that God has turned the whole thing around to bring a great victory.

²⁹ Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

From the other Gospels we learn that Jesus went from Tyre and Sidon to the Decapolis region via Lake Semechonitis. This big circular route through Gentile regions ended on the Southeastern shore of Galilee. Then Jesus moved up the hillside, just as He did when He fed the 5000.

³⁰ Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them.

Apparently, the man who was delivered of demons did a good job sharing what the Lord had done for him. The people of the Decapolis region, who were for the most part Greek, knew that Jesus had the power to heal. Whereas their gods had failed to do anything for them, Jesus never failed to be able to heal. Imagine how word of this would spread. If you saw someone healed, you would immediately think of a relative or friend that was suffering from some affliction. Most of us can think of someone right now that we would run to so that we could bring them to Jesus. I would run and get Ann's husband, John, right up the street here. However, that would just be the first of many. I would get the most seriously ill first. I would send Andrew to get his mom in Indiana. How many people would have run to get Terri Schiavo last week? Who would you run to get? It would not take long for thousands to gather. That is exactly what happened in that desolate area Jesus had gone to. Every possible affliction was probably represented, and everyone was healed.

³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

The wonder of witnessing all these healings caused them to praise the God of Israel. Remember, the Greeks had many gods. They could easily add the God of Israel to their list. It is a problem today in Hindu and other pantheistic countries. Christians witness to them and pray for their healing, and when God answers that prayer, they add Jesus to the list of their gods. However, the God of Israel said you may not have any other gods before Him. (Exodus 20:3) That is the first commandment. So this was not necessarily a step of salvation for these Greeks, but it was a step in the right direction. Just as the once demon possessed, now delivered missionary, was the first step, so this was one more step. After Pentecost, Christians would travel up into these regions and share more fully the gospel of salvation, and these prepared hearts would become some of the first Christians.

If you have the opportunity to share Christ with someone, do not be discouraged if they do not immediately begin a new life or even accept what you are sharing. You may be the first, second or third of many steps the person takes toward accepting the work of the Holy Spirit in their life. Remember, your witness is an important and necessary step in that process.

³² Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want

Commented [notes4]: ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.
Exodus 20:3 (NIV)

to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

It was time to move on, but first, Jesus was concerned for the hunger of the people. What a contrast with that of the Greek gods. Those gods could care less about man's suffering. Compassion would have been considered a weakness. I am so grateful, that the real God, the Creator, is a compassionate God who even cares about hunger. (Hebrews 4:15)

Man's wars and selfishness cause people to starve. Every time that happens, you can be sure the heart of God is aching for those who are suffering. (Exodus 3:7) I know that is true because Jesus had compassion on these people who had gone three days without food. He was concerned that they would collapse on the way home if they did not have nourishment. That is the heart of a father for his children. It is God's heart for you. That is the reason Christians are one of the main sources of hunger relief in the world today. They share the compassionate heart of Jesus.

³³ *His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"*

Now didn't they say this before? Actually, they said they did not have enough money, because near the feeding of the 5000 were a number of small cities. (Mark 6:37) This time, there were no bakeries nearby. But didn't they get the idea that Jesus could deal with it? I would like to think that if I were there I would have said, "Alright, Jesus! Do it again!" However, if I am honest with myself, I realize I probably would not have. That is because God sometimes does amazing things in my life, but when I face the situation the second time, for some reason I do not expect God to work in the same way. Now, that is not totally without Scriptural foundation. God does work in different ways even in similar situations. Of all the detailed descriptions of Jesus healing people, very few are the same. Still, why didn't someone say, "Do what you did with the 5000"? How many times do we have to see God work before we start to expect Him to meet the need?

I really think we have such little faith that we do not think that God will "do it again". There may also have been some of that good ol' Jewish prejudice toward Gentiles. Sure, God would feed His chosen people as He did when the manna fell, but would He bother with Gentiles? Here is where the connection with the previous story becomes important. Jesus' heart for the Gentiles is just as big as His heart for the Jew. He loves that Canaanite woman just as much as He loves the crowd of Greeks, and He loves them as much as He loves the disciples. God loves the world. He gave Himself for the world. He is concerned about the details of your life. He cares if you have enough to eat. He is concerned about everything that affects you. (Psalms 139:1-3) That is a heart so big that I cannot fathom it. Nevertheless, I know that it is true.

³⁴ *"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."*

That is more than they had for the 5000. (Matthew 14:17) The quantity does not matter. What does matter is the Maker. What do you have to put into the Master's hands? It does not take much. Just surrender what you have. Your background does not matter, your culture, your former religion, your family life or what you have

Commented [notes5]: ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Hebrews 4:15 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: ⁷ The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. Exodus 3:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: ³⁷ But he answered, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?" Mark 6:37 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: ¹ O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. ² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. ³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Psalms 139:1-3 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: ¹⁷ "We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered. Matthew 14:17 (NIV)

done in the past. What matters is that you are placing your complete trust in Him right now. (Psalms 62:8)

Commented [notes10]: ⁸ Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Selah
Psalms 62:8 (NIV)

³⁵ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people.

Jesus started with the practical. If you start to feed a hungry crowd on their feet, you will be mobbed. Jesus thanked God for the miracle He knew would take place. Then He did what He still does today. He broke the bread and gave it to the disciples to give to the people. Do you realize that you are His disciples? Every time you open God's word with a hungry heart, He breaks it and gives it to you in appropriate portions, and then you pass it on to others. (Matthew 5:6) Do not miss that point.

Commented [notes11]: ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Matthew 5:6 (NIV)

I do not know if His message to the disciples could not have been any clearer. He declared that He is the Bread of Life. (John 6:35) He needed them to distribute that bread to the people of the world. That is the Great Commission. (Mark 16:15) That is our job. Take the Bread of Life to a hungry world. Like those Greeks who had been waiting for a real God who could affect their world, the world around us today is waiting for a God that can fill a heart with love and peace. They are hungry too, but not for the food that perishes. (John 6:27)

Commented [notes12]: ³⁵ Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."
John 6:35 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: ¹⁵ He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."
Mark 16:15 (NIV)

³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

Do you remember the word "satisfied"? The same word was used in the feeding of the 5000. It means to be fed until you do not want another bite. They did not just get a bite or two, Jesus filled them up. Moreover, when the Creator makes fish sandwiches, you can bet you never had better! Isn't that what they said when He made wine? (John 2:10) "Why did you save the best for last?" Jesus gives us Himself as the satisfying food for our souls, and there is more than enough. We can spiritually eat our fill. We do not need to worry about one day going spiritually hungry. With every other soul food the world has to offer, you will one day be dissatisfied. But Jesus will always satisfy the hunger of a heart after God. (Psalms 63:5) You can stop anytime, anywhere, and eat your fill. Every morning as I open His word, I experience the satisfaction of eating until I am full. I hope you take time to do the same.

Commented [notes14]: ²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."
John 6:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes15]: ¹⁰ and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."
John 2:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: ⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
Psalms 63:5 (NIV)

The feeding of the 5000 is so similar that the differences must carefully be observed. In this case, seven baskets full of leftovers were gathered. It has been suggested that the twelve baskets represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and the seven baskets the seven nations that were removed from Canaan, (Joshua 3:10) the nations of the world. The more I consider that symbolism, the more I think it is probably intended. The differences in the two stories seemed to emphasize, for the disciples sake, that Jesus is just as concerned about the Gentile as He is the Jew. He is sufficient bread for the world. The spiritual hunger of the entire world can be met in Him. That is why Christianity is the most global religion. He is enough to satisfy the need of every human soul in every culture.

Commented [notes17]: ¹⁰ This is how you will know that the living God is among you and that he will certainly drive out before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites.
Joshua 3:10 (NIV)

³⁸ *The number of those who ate was four thousand, besides women and children.* In addition to the previous symbolism, four is often numerically representative of the world. There were four thousand men, so we could guess that there were at least 12,000 people gathered. That is a whole lot of fish sandwiches! They were receiving a lot more than fish sandwiches.

³⁹ *After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.*

From here, Jesus was headed North to another Greek area known as Caesarea Philippi. (Matthew 16:13) He continued traveling in Gentile regions.

I trust this morning that you have seen in this passage that Jesus loves the world. (John 3:16) He is the satisfying food the world needs. He is the Great Provider that gives Himself out of compassion for the entire world. (Romans 5:8) He is the only place the heart of man can eat until truly satisfied. Have you been satisfied with Jesus? Do you know the compassion He has for you?

I think one of the goals of the enemy of our soul is to paint a picture of Jesus that is more like the enemy's own image. These stories of Jesus correct our false impressions. In this passage, we have more than a provider of fish sandwiches. We have the heart of our compassionate God that is concerned about our daily needs.

Daniel and Elizabeth just moved into their first home. There were a few things they did not have like a washer and dryer and microwave. As they took their first load of things to the house, straight down the street from them was a washer on the street. They went to the door and asked if it worked and if they could buy it. The person said not only did it work, but also they could have it and the dryer if they would just haul it away. That same day, someone came by the church with a microwave in the box they bought it in and asked if I could give it to someone that might need it. Well, does God care about the details of our lives and bless his faithful servants with all their needs.

You see, God wants to bless our lives, not blast them. (Acts 3:26) He is offering Himself, not demanding you obey. It is true that He desires obedience, but not out of duty or obligation, but as an expression of love. Looking through the expressions of Jesus we find that throughout His ministry He knew He was giving Himself to the world as the solution to their spiritual starvation. The psalmist wrote, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalms 34:8)

Are you eating your fill? Are you being satisfied with Him? If you do not satisfy your hunger with Jesus on a regular basis, you will try to find things of the world to meet the hunger in your heart. If you wonder why you are tempted to indulge in the world, to watch that show you know you should not watch, or buy that car you know is out of your price range, or whatever temporal thing promises to satisfy, the answer may be that you have not been eating the spiritual food that was meant to satisfy your heart. (Ephesians 4:19) Moreover, for those of you who have, who know the wonderful peaceful feeling of being full, like the disciples, pass that satisfying meal on to the hungry souls around you.

Commented [notes18]: ¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Matthew 16:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16 (NIV)

Commented [notes20]: ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: ²⁶ When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." Acts 3:26 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: ⁸ Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Psalms 34:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. Ephesians 4:19 (NIV)

