

Jesus Feeds Thousands

The Glory and Identity of Jesus of Nazareth

Scripture: Matthew 14:13-21

Sermon Series: *Matthew*

Topic: Jesus, Messiah, Miracles

Matthew 14:13-21 (ESV)

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. 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." ¹⁶ But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Introduction

This is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded by all four gospel authors.¹ Thus, this is significant to each of them in understanding the identity of Jesus. It also displays his glory.

Here we find Jesus providing food for thousands of hungry people.

Here we see the glory of Jesus. We see his compassion, his plan, and his abundant provision.

We are naturally confronted with questions of his identity? Who is he? An itinerant preacher? A



¹ Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14.

revolutionary leader? A resurrected John the Baptist? Is he THE prophet, the one Moses spoke of long ago, the one who is to come? Or is he someone else entirely?

Father, give each of us eyes to see Jesus for who he truly is. Give us eyes to see his glory. Give us hearts that love him as he deserves. Keep the enemy, and all his wicked attendants, away from us. Through Christ I pray. Amen.

Compassion in Suffering

Jesus is a glorious person. He is glorious because he shows *compassion to the suffering*.

Matthew 14:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Now when Jesus heard this. The “this” refers specifically² to the news of the death of John the Baptist (mentioned in v.12), as we saw last week. Upon hearing the sad news of the unjust execution of Jesus’ close relative and partner in ministry, Jesus is deeply affected and sought solitude from the crowds. He is grieving the loss of a great man³ and close friend. Jesus wanted to be alone with his Father⁴ in prayer (though the disciples were also with him⁵).

He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. Most likely Jesus was in Capernaum when he got in the boat. Luke tells us that the *desolate place* to which Jesus and the Twelve went, in the region around a town called Bethsaida, which is about four miles northeast of Capernaum.



But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. The Sea of Galilee is the lowest freshwater lake on earth. It is eight miles wide and thirteen miles long. It is possible to see across the lake. Thus, when word spread that Jesus had gotten into a boat, the crowds then watched him from the shoreline to see where he was going. They then followed him around the lake as he progressed across it. As they watched him, they were able



² This may also indirectly refer to Jesus hearing the news that Herod had heard about the spreading fame of Jesus and concluded that John the Baptist had resurrected from the dead (Matthew 14:2).

³ Luke 7:28.

⁴ He is not able to actually achieve this until 14:23.

⁵ The disciples joined Jesus as he withdrew from the crowds. See Mark 6:32; Luke 9:10.

to arrive at his destination before he did. Thus, the crowds were already there when Jesus got out of the boat.

When he went ashore he saw a great crowd. Jesus' desire to be away from the crowds in order to pray and process his grief is interrupted by the presence of a **great crowd** of people on the shore. This is not a small crowd, but rather a **great crowd**, numbering in the thousands. He is seeking solitude and he meets with a shoreline saturated with people. Jesus is unable to find time alone for himself. What will he do? What would you do in this situation? Will Jesus reprimand them for being selfish and send them away?

He had compassion on them (v.14). Jesus does not send them away. He does not get angry with him. He does not yell at them saying, "What about me? Do any of you think about me? Do you not know that my cousin was just now murdered by a cowardly 'king?' Can any of you think about anyone other than yourselves? Can I not have a couple of hours to grieve the loss of my friend?" He is not filled with frustration, but rather he is filled with **compassion**.

The word means "to have pity; to be deeply moved in one's inner being (lit. the bowels);"⁶ "to experience great affection... for someone—'to feel... for, to have great affection for, love.'"⁷



Jesus was a man of emotion. Jesus, while inwardly grieving his own loss, is yet able to look at the crowds of people—many of them sick—and find his heart emotionally moved with love and affection and **compassion** at their plight.

We've seen this before. We saw it back in Matthew 9:36 when Jesus saw that the crowds "were *helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd.*" When he saw their condition, he was moved with compassion. So what did his compassion compel him to do?

He healed their sick (v.14). There were sick among this massive crowd. Who among us wants to go for a four mile hike when you're sick? Imagine walking four miles around a lake when you're sick. No doubt that present among them were many who were wounded and lame and ill. Perhaps some had fevers or chronic pain. They all were so desperate to be near Jesus that they followed a significant distance around the lake. They needed healing and there was no hope healing anywhere, expect in Jesus! Jesus saw their need and he met it. Many of them were sick and Jesus healed them. The impression we get is that this took a while, and yet Jesus patiently bore with them and **healed their sick**.

⁶ Rick Brannan, ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, Lexham Research Lexicons (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 293.

Summary

Jesus is a glorious person. He lays aside his own sorrow in order to minister to those who are sick. He pushes pause on his own pain in order to take away the pain of others. He was seeking solitary place, yet found himself saturated with people. But this inconvenience did not fill him with anger, but rather filled him with *compassion*. So he healed their sick. Jesus is a glorious person, who shows compassion to sick and suffering when he himself was suffering.

A Perplexing Plan

Jesus is glorious because he has a ***perplexing plan***. The disciples have a practical plan, but Jesus has a perplexing plan.

Matthew 14:15-18 (ESV) 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." ¹⁶ But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me."

Now when it was evening (v.15). Jesus has likely been at the healing of the sick for some time. The ***day is now over*** and evening was beginning. The sun was setting and there were no street lights and no one packed a lunch, so he disciples have a very practical plan.

Send the crowds away (v.15). It's time to eat, but there is no meat. Thus, dear Jesus, let the crowds retreat. The practical plan was so send away the crowds to go into the nearby villages and buy food for themselves. This sounds like a good plan. There are a lot of people, so let them go fend for themselves.

Notice that in their enthusiasm for hearing that Jesus was in a boat going away to another part of the sea, no one thought to bring food. They took no thought for how long they might be gone. No one considered that there were going on a long hike and needed food. It seems their only concern was being near Jesus.

They need not go away (v.16). Jesus said that there is no need to send the crowds away. If there is no need to send them away, then Jesus has a plan. He has already considered the time of day and need of the people and he has plan. He knows what he intends to do.⁸

You give them something to eat (v.16). Jesus tells his disciples that they should take care of the need. This no doubt was confusing to them. Certainly they were wondering what Jesus could mean. The disciples would not have suggested sending the crowds away if they had food to give them. But no doubt they knew that Jesus knew they had no food. They had all been together in the same boat as they crossed the sea of Galilee and clearly Jesus saw that they were not towing a small barge with food enough to support a great crowd of thousands of people. What was Jesus meaning? Why was he saying this?

⁸ John tells us explicitly, "he himself knew what he would do" (John 6:6).

Five loaves and two fish. This the best the disciples could come up with. This they found from little lad.⁹ These loaves were made of barley¹⁰ and would have been smaller than what we might think of as a loaf of bread. These would have been more like what we would think of as buns.¹¹ This is essentially a little kid's sack lunch. This is a one-person meal.



Bring them here to me. Jesus' interest in this tiny lunch is perplexing. It's barely enough for one person, so what's the point when you consider the massive crowd. John records that Andrew asking, "What are they for so many?"¹² What could Jesus be up to? Why does he want this little snack? Maybe he'll just eat it himself? Nevertheless, the disciples obey him. They may not understand his plan, but they obey his command.

Summary

Jesus is a glorious person. In the face the great need of this great crowd, the disciples offer a very practical solution. "Send the crowds away," they say. However, Jesus counters by saying, "They need not go away." Jesus is not flustered by this situation. He is not fearful. He is perplexing to the disciples, but he does have a plan.

Abundant Provision (v.19-21)

This perplexing plan involves **abundant provision**. Jesus will show his glory.

Matthew 14:19-21 (ESV) ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass (v.19). "Sit down" translates one Greek word (*anaklinō ἀνακλίνω*) that literally means, "to cause someone to assume a reclining (or possibly sitting) position as part of the process of eating—'to cause to recline to eat, to have someone

⁹ John 6:9.

¹⁰ John 6:9.

¹¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 378.

¹² John 6:9.

sit down to eat.”¹³ Here we have our first clue as to what Jesus was planning to do. He was planning a meal.

No doubt the disciples thought, “Why have them recline when there is no food?” Nevertheless, they obeyed. (Luke tells us that Jesus instructed them to sit in groups of “about fifty,” thus the reason why it was so easy to tally up the number of people¹⁴).

This was no sandy desert. It was a **grassy** place. However, it was an uninhabited place. There were villages within some walking distance (we are not told how far away), but the region was remote and solitary. Jesus went there to get away from the crowds, so this was a wild place that people did not regularly frequent.

He looked up to heaven and said a blessing (v.19). The traditional blessing that the head of the Jewish household regularly prayed over the meal is a blessing upon God who provided the meal, rather than upon the food that has been provided. The traditional prayer¹⁵ was,

“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”¹⁶

This prayer of blessing is a pronouncement of blessing upon God who causes wheat and barely to grow in the earth, from which bread is made and people nourished.

Taking five loaves and two fish..., he broke the loaves (v.19) **and the fish** (Mk 6:41). This is where the miracle happened, but it was not immediately seen by the crowds. Jesus kept breaking the bread and multiplying it as he gave it to each of the disciples, who then gave the pieces of bread and fish to the crowds. Jesus kept taking, breaking, and giving bread and fish to his disciples, who then gave the bread and fish to all the crowds were served. Jesus **created** much bread out of a little bread. He **created** many fish out of two fish. Jesus created thousands of loaves and thousands of fish out of the five and two that they held in his hands. He was serving his people in an unusual way, in a way he has never done before.

They all ate and were satisfied (v.20). Everyone ate and were **satisfied**. This was not a meager provision. This was satisfied provision. All the little kids who were asking, “Is there any more? Can I have some more?” Everyone asked, “Is there any more,” until they were “**all satisfied**.” The disciples were the first to know what had taken place. The crowds simply knew they had food delivered to them. But they did not know from where it came. However, Jesus’ disciples knew everything. They too ate and were satisfied.

And there were a lot of people there that day, a lot of empty stomachs that were satisfied by Jesus. Matthew tells us that there about **five thousand men**, besides women and

¹³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 218.

¹⁴ Luke 9:14.

¹⁵ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1995), 418.

¹⁶ Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah : A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 9.

children. If we assume that many of those men would have been married and that it was not uncommon for married couples to have many children. Thus, some estimate that the total number there that day that Jesus fed could have been about ten to twenty thousand.¹⁷

The word *satisfied* reminds us of what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*" (Mt 5:6). These on this day were hungering for bread, rather than righteousness, but Jesus satisfied them. It is much easier to provide food than it is to provide righteousness but Jesus here demonstrates he has the power to miraculously provide the food, which points to what he will do miraculously do in the near future to provide righteousness as well.

They took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces left over (v.20). John records that Jesus commanded the disciples, "*Gather up the leftover fragments...*" (Jn 6:12). Thus, each disciple obeyed his command. Each one found a basket and went around collecting the leftover fragments of bread and fish.¹⁸ There were twelve baskets of collected leftovers because there were twelve disciples doing the collecting.

It was not until the collecting of the leftovers that the massive truth of the miracle settled in.¹⁹ The fact of the miracle was not so manifestly evident until the murmuring for more had stopped, and then all the leftovers were collected. Twelve baskets full of leftovers!! He created so much more than was needed! Twelve baskets of extra food! That is ridiculous!

These twelve full baskets point to the true identity of Jesus. Who is this who creates bread and fish in desolate places? Who is this who can provide food for about ten thousand people out some kid's sack lunch?

There has been much speculation on the symbolism of what the twelve baskets might signify, but that is not the primary point. The primary point is that Jesus has the power to create more than enough of whatever is needed. They started with almost nothing, and ended with a superabundance. Jesus is truly glorious. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as *a gloriously abundant provider!*

Conclusion

This passage reveals the glory of Jesus and points to the true identity of Jesus.

The Glory of Jesus

First, he is a *compassionate healer*. He sees the weaknesses, wounds, and sickness of his people, and his heart is deeply moved with affection within him. He sees our pain and his heart yearns to relieve our suffering. Jesus is moved with compassion and he heals. He does this when he himself is already grieving. He does this when it is inconvenient. He halts his plans so

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 342.

¹⁸ Mark specifically mentions that the collected fragments included both the loaves and the fish (6:43).

¹⁹ See John 6:13-14, which relates that it was only after the collection of the twelve full baskets that "the people saw the sign that he had done, and they said, 'This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!'"

he can touch and heal the sick. Matthew reveals the glory of Jesus by showing us that he is a compassionate healer.

Second, he is a *perplexing planner*. He always has a plan. He always “knows what he is about to do.”²⁰ Jesus is a planner and he always has a plan, even when we have no idea what is happening or is about to happen, yet he always has a plan. Jesus knew he would feed the crowds. He was not worried or anxious or fearful. He was simply doing the will of God the Father. He revealed that plan, it became evident, as his disciples obeyed commands, even when they did not understand what he was planning or doing. His plan was perplexing in the beginning, but he had a plan. Matthew reveals the glory of Jesus by showing us that even though we may not understand his plan, nevertheless, he is a planner and has a plan.

Third, Jesus is an *abundant provider*. Jesus is able to make much out of little. He has power to provide in superabundant ways. He not only took care of the hunger of 8,000 to 10,000 people, he demonstrated his overflowing power by creating more than was needed. Jesus is a glorious, abundant provider.

Jesus is all of these things! But he is also **more** than these things. So much more.

The Identity of Jesus

Matthew continues to paint for us an ever clearer picture of the true identity of Jesus.

Greater than John the Baptist

Matthew also lays before us, facts that cause us to think about the identity of Jesus. Who is he? King Herod thought he was John the Baptist resurrected.²¹ But Jesus was much more than a resurrected John. John himself, while in prison, had wondered about who Jesus is asking, “*Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?*” (Mt 11:3). In answer to this question Jesus pointed to manifest power of the kingdom of heaven at work in and through him, “*the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the poor are given hope, and the dead are raised*” (Mt 11:4-6). John the Baptist was a great prophet, but he never did any of these things.

Jesus is clearly greater than John the Baptist.

Greater than Moses

Moses was also great. God did great things through Moses. God had promised Moses that he would raise up a prophet like Moses, but one who would be even greater than Moses.²²

²⁰ John 6:6.

²¹ Matthew 14:2.

²² Deuteronomy 18:18-19.

Moses led Israel through a wilderness. Jesus is here leading the people of Israel through a desolate, wilderness-like place. God, through Moses, gave Israel manna. God, through Jesus, is here giving the people bread. But with the manna, there was only ever just enough (Ex 16:18). There was never an abundance. There was always just enough for the needs of each day. One could never store manna overnight in a basket or a bin, since it rotted and stank.

However, with Jesus it is different. Jesus satisfied the daily need, but then he created more. So much more! He created ridiculously more. Jesus created enough bread, on the spot, for about ten thousand people to have their hunger satisfied, but then also made abundantly more, so much more that twelve baskets full of leftovers were taken up in the end. And those twelve baskets didn't rot and stink.

Jesus is clearly so much greater than Moses.

Sin is a sickness far more devastating than cancer. Jesus is the only one able to heal from the contagion of sin. He is a *compassionate* Savior. Go to Jesus for healing from your sin.

Our souls hunger. We were created to hunger for God, but we often mistake the hunger of our soul for a hunger for things. No thing can satisfy the hunger of your soul. Only the King can satisfy the hunger of your soul. Only Jesus *satisfies* the hungry and thirsty soul.

He has *abundance* you cannot imagine. Jesus overflows with abundant life. He can ridiculously provide for you—whatever it is that you need. Go to him in faith and he will satisfy.

Discussion Questions

1. What does this passage reveal about the crowds?
2. What does this passage reveal about the disciples?
3. What does it reveal about Jesus? What does the fact that Jesus is compassionate say to you about the nature of Jesus?
4. True or False: This is the only miracle of Jesus recorded by all four gospel authors.
5. How would you summarize the meaning of the twelve baskets of leftovers being collected by the disciples? Why did Jesus create so much?
6. What do you think Matthew wanted his readers to conclude from his account of this miracle?
7. What is one encouraging truth that you will take with you after considering this portion of Scripture?