

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

Luke 9:10-17

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Scripture

There are only two miracles that are recorded in all four of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. One miracle is Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the other miracle is Jesus feeding the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand is in fact mentioned nine times in all the Gospels. Besides the four detailed accounts of the miracle itself in the Gospels, it is referred to on five other occasions (Matthew 16:9; Mark 6:52; 8:19; John 6:23; 6:26).

Jesus feeding the five thousand follows Jesus sending out the twelve apostles on their first short-term missions trip (Luke 9:1-6). Jesus gave them authority to preach, heal, and cast out demons. The twelve were so successful in their ministry assignment that even King Herod heard about all that was happening. He was so perplexed about it that he asked regarding Jesus, "Who is this about whom I hear such things?" (Luke 9:7-9). The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand teaches us more about the identity and mission of Jesus.

Jesus feeding the five thousand concludes his ministry in Galilee. As commentator Kent Hughes observes, "Here Galilee's privileged opportunity, its season of grace, concludes."¹ After "the world's most famous picnic,"² as Phil Ryken calls it, Jesus' ministry would now move to the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Caesarea Philippi, and then to the Transjordan, and finally down through Judea to Jerusalem where he would be crucified.

Let's read about Jesus feeding the five thousand in Luke

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 328-329.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Vol. 1: Chapters 1-12, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 433.

9:10-17:

¹⁰ On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. ¹¹ 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. ¹² 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." ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." ¹⁵ And they did so, and had them all sit down. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces. (Luke 9:10-17)

Introduction

About twenty-five years ago I attended a Men's Retreat. There were about one hundred and fifty men from about fifteen churches in attendance. I still remember what the speaker said when he began his first message. He said, "If you have been a Christian for any length of time, what I am about to say in my messages will not be new to you. I am simply going to remind you of what you already know."

As a young pastor I was surprised by his comment. But after twenty-five years of ministry I fully agree with him.

Much of the Christian life is remembering what we have forgotten. I like the way Phil Ryken puts it:

What are some of the basic lessons that Christians sometimes forget to remember? We forget to study the Bible, not remembering that God's Word gives us life. We forget the power of prayer, not remembering that God's blessing is ours for the asking. We forget that we cannot make it on our own, not remembering our deep dependency on the Holy Spirit. We forget that we do not have to work our way to heaven, not remembering that God has accepted us in Christ. We forget how much God loves us, not remembering that we are his sons and daughters. We forget that our Father knows best, not remembering to trust his sovereign plan for our lives. And we forget that God will provide, not remembering his promise to give us our daily bread.³

The twelve apostles also struggled to remember lessons taught to them by our Lord Jesus Christ. This is dramatically illustrated in the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

Lesson

The miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand in Luke 9:10-17 will teach us that all we really need is Jesus.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Retreat of Jesus (9:10)
2. The Compassion of Jesus (9:11)
3. The Command of Jesus (9:12-13)
4. The Provision of Jesus (9:14-16)
5. The Sufficiency of Jesus (9:17)

I. The Retreat of Jesus (9:10)

First, let's look at the retreat of Jesus.

Luke told us in the first part of chapter 9 that Jesus sent

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 432-433.

the twelve apostles out on their first short-term missions trip. We don't know how long it was, perhaps a week or longer. **On their return the apostles told him all that they had done** (9:10a). They had preached the gospel, healed people, and even cast demons out of people. It was a marvelous season of ministry for them. They must have been heady with the number of people converted and healed under their ministry.

But, understandably, they must also have been exhausted. So, Jesus decided it was time to take them on a retreat, **and he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida** (9:10b). **Bethsaida** was "a city located 3 kilometers (1.7 miles) NNE of the mouth of the Jordan River on the Sea of Galilee The abundance of game and fish inhabiting the nearby plains and waters is responsible for the name Bethsaida, which means 'house of the hunter/fisherman.'"⁴

Note that rest is necessary, especially after a busy season of ministry. God has wonderfully provided a weekly rhythm of work and rest. We work six days and rest on the seventh day. That is the pattern that God has set in his Word. However, in addition, there may be times when we are especially busy with a project or ministry. Be sure to spend time with Jesus regularly, especially after a busy season of ministry.

II. The Compassion of Jesus (9:11)

Second, notice the compassion of Jesus.

Jesus' departure to Bethsaida with his twelve apostles did not go unnoticed. **When the crowds learned it, they followed him** (9:11a). Mark writes, "Now many saw [Jesus and his apostles] going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them" (Mark 6:33).

⁴ Michael M. Homan, "Bethsaida," ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 174.

John tells us why the crowds followed him, “Because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick” (John 6:2). John MacArthur says, “They were thrill seekers, who eagerly followed Jesus as their king who could provide healing and free food.”⁵

Imagine the setting. The apostles were exhausted after their short-term missions trip. They just wanted a few days to get some rest and refreshment. They just wanted a few days to be alone with Jesus. How annoying to have all these crowds around. Couldn’t the crowds just give them a few days alone?

But how did Jesus respond? Luke said that Jesus **welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing** (9:11b). Even though Jesus himself was also exhausted, **he welcomed them**. Jesus was willing to be inconvenienced so long as he had an opportunity to tell people about **the kingdom of God**.

What does this tell us about Jesus? Phil Ryken says, “The way Jesus welcomed these people reminds us that we can go to him at any time; he will listen to our cry for help.”⁶

Do you have a need or concern? Go to Jesus. He is always available. He will always receive you. He will always help you.

But this also tells us about how we as Christians are to serve. We are to serve as Jesus served. That means, as Ryken says, “Even when we are tired and weary, wanting to take a break from other people and their problems, we need to be ready to give them the gospel and to help them in any practical way we can.”⁷

III. The Command of Jesus (9:12-13)

Third, note the command of Jesus.

⁵ John MacArthur, *Luke 6-10*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2011), 252.

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 434.

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, 434.

Luke said in verse 12 that **the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to Jesus, “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.”**

Don’t miss what is going on here. The twelve have just completed their first ministry internship assignment. Frankly, it had gone very well. Even Herod was talking about it! I mean, these twelve – along with Jesus, of course! – were the talk of the palace. And the crowds had rushed to Bethsaida so that they could be with Jesus – and them!

As **the day began to wear away** and the shadows began to lengthen, the twelve decided to tell Jesus what he should do next. This is like a pastoral intern telling a seasoned pastor how he should conduct his ministry! And, lest you miss it, in the Greek the verb for “**send**” is a command. They as much *commanded* Jesus to **send the crowd away**.

But Jesus said to them, “You give them something to eat” (9:13a). This is also a command in the Greek text. Jesus was putting the responsibility right back on the twelve. The command given by Jesus was emphatic, with the emphasis falling on the word “**you**”: “**You give them something to eat.**” The twelve had just recently returned from their short-term ministry assignment, and they had seen God do wonderful miracles through their own ministry. Jesus wanted the twelve to realize that the only reason that they were able to do ministry is because of his authorizing and enabling power.

But the twelve had so quickly forgotten how God had used them for ministry. **They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people”** (9:13b).

The trouble with the apostles is that they did not think about what God could and would do to provide for the needs of the crowd. All they had was **five loaves and two fish** – hardly

enough to feed one grown man, let alone five thousand men.

Commentator David Gooding remarks that Jesus' question ought to have "startled them into thinking that there might be more to the kingdom of God and the powers of Jesus than they had yet realized. Instead of that, the highest their thoughts could rise to was the possibility of going to the nearest merchants (wholesalers, of course) and buying the necessary quantity of food."⁸ The twelve were forgetting that they served a God who provided for their inadequacies.

The principle is this: God is not limited by our inadequacies. In fact, our inadequacies can display his power to supply all our needs according to his riches in glory.

One man who understood this principle well was Robert Morrison, the famous missionary to China. In 1805 the London Missionary Society recruited Morrison to go to China. It was the time of the Napoleonic Wars, however, and the only British ships traveling to China belonged to the East India Company, which refused to transport missionaries. So Morrison went to the United States, hoping to book a berth on a ship sailing to Canton, China. When the owner of the ship heard about Morrison's plans, he was skeptical.

"And so, Mr. Morrison," he said, "do you really expect that you will make an impression on the idolatry of the great Chinese Empire?"

"No, sir," Morrison quickly replied, "I expect God will."⁹

Morrison understood that our service is not measured by human ability but by divine enabling. So, ask God to keep reminding you that his power will enable you to serve him and others well.

⁸ David Gooding, *According to Luke: A New Exposition of the Third Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 162.

⁹ The story is recounted in David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 36.

IV. The Provision of Jesus (9:14-16)

Fourth, observe the provision of Jesus.

Luke noted that **there were about five thousand men** (9:14a). Matthew notes in his Gospel, “And those who ate were about five thousand men, *besides women and children*” (14:21). That means that there could have been as many as twenty-five thousand people in attendance that day.

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” And they did so, and had them all sit down (9:14b-15). Picture the twelve apostles moving through the crowd and telling them to organize themselves into groups of about fifty each. That could be as many as five hundred groups!

Well, the crowd did what they were told. Then, **taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them** (9:16a). Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven and probably gave the traditional blessing that is preserved in the *Mishnah*: “Blessed be you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth.”¹⁰

Then, Luke said in verse 16b, that Jesus broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. The Greek word for “gave” is in the imperfect tense, which literally means that Jesus “kept giving.” The apostles each got a massive handful of loaves and fish, they rushed to the group for which they were responsible, handed them out, and then rushed back to Jesus for more food! Every time they went back, Jesus always gave them more. Alexander Maclaren said, “The pieces grew under his touch, and the disciples always found his hands full when they came back with their own empty.”¹¹

¹⁰ I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 362, who explains that the Greek word used here refers to a prayer of thanks for the bread.

¹¹ Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1971), 258.

This was a marvelous miracle of creation. It demonstrated that Jesus is able to create food. He can do that of course because he is fully God and fully man.

However, many liberal scholars deny that this is a miracle of creation. This is how R. C. Sproul explains it:

One theory was this: what took place was not a miracle—Jesus did not proliferate the loaves and pieces of fish to feed over five thousand people; rather he had the disciples go through the crowd to find people who were willing to share what they had with those who had brought nothing. Therefore, the real miracle here was not a supernatural event in space and time; it was an ethical miracle. Jesus had everybody share their lunch. Well, if that's the point, it was missed completely by four gospel writers.¹²

V. The Sufficiency of Jesus (9:17)

And finally, look at the sufficiency of Jesus.

Luke said in verse 17 that **they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.**

After every person there that day ate, they **were** all fully **satisfied**. And, there was plenty left over. In fact, there were **twelve baskets of broken pieces** left over. There was one basket for each one of the twelve apostles. I suspect that Jesus wanted each apostle to carry around a big, heavy basket of his wonderful bread and fish to remind him in a dramatic and vivid way the abundance of his provision.

Let us remember that Jesus' provision is always abundant. Jesus is always able to meet our every need. There is short and memorable poem that captures this truth:

¹² R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 195–196.

Yesterday, God helped me,
Today he'll do the same.
How long will this continue?
Forever – praise his name.¹³

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand in Luke 9:10-17, we should look to Jesus to provide our needs.

We need to remember that Jesus will provide our needs because we tend to forget. Jesus provides our daily bread, our food, our clothing, and our shelter. Jesus provides our needs for friendship and love. Jesus provides opportunities to serve him and the resources to fulfill our calling

But the most important need that Jesus provides is not material but spiritual. Jesus is our spiritual nourishment and provision, our sustenance and satisfaction. Jesus said in John 6:33, “For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” He also said in John 6:51, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.”

Bishop J. C. Ryle wrote, “The heart of man can never be satisfied with the things of this world. It is always empty, and hungry, and thirsty, and dissatisfied, till it comes to Christ. It is only they who hear Christ’s voice, and follow him, and feed on him by faith, who are filled.”¹⁴

Of all the things that we need to remember and never forget, the most important is the provision of eternal life that comes by trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation as he is offered in the gospel. Remember this, and never forget it. Amen.

¹³ Anonymous, quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 331.

¹⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 1 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 303.

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and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Father, thank you for the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand. What a wonderful miracle of provision. What a wonderful account of how you are not limited by our inadequacies. What a wonderful encouragement to know that all that we really need is Jesus.

Oh God, if there is anyone here today that has not yet put his or her faith in Jesus, will you grant that person saving faith.

And for this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!