

“Overflowing (Yet Misunderstood) Goodness”

John 6:1-15

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After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³ Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” ¹⁰ Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

¹⁵ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. – John 6:1-15, ESV

Introduction: Wants vs. Needs

When I was a junior in high school, we were asked to write an autobiography 10-15 years in the future, imagining ourselves at the age of 26-31 years old. I laugh and shake my head now at how shallow and materialistic my life aspirations were at the age of 16.

How old were you when you realized that the things you want most in life are not the same as the things you most need? We think we want good food, good rest, relaxation, peace and quiet or we think we want adventure, fun, entertainment and excitement. But what happens when we get what we want? So often, we’re disappointed or, worse yet, we become selfish, spoiled and entitled. How often have the unwelcome things, the inconvenient things, the hard things, and the deeply painful things been the very things to show us our sin and help us repent or draw us closer to Christ or taught us how to really pray?

A. The Expectant Crowd, vv. 1-2

What will he do next?

By the time we come to the beginning of John 6, somewhere between six months and a year has elapsed since the time when Jesus was in Jerusalem in John 5. During this time, Jesus has been engaged in active ministry throughout Galilee, teaching large crowds and healing many sick people. John doesn’t cover very much of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, probably because he’s writing his Gospel later than the other three and he knows that most of his readers would already be familiar with much of the ground covered in Matthew, Mark and Luke. He does include this one incident, the feeding of the 5,000, which is a rare event outside of the final week of Jesus’ life, because it’s included in all four Gospels.

In John’s Gospel, the feeding of the 5,000 partly serves to set the context for his teaching later in this chapter on Himself as the Bread of Life. But that’s not the only reason why this story is here. It shows us much about Jesus’ character and power, as well as much about the expectations and hopes of the people. The disconnect between the agenda of the people and the kingdom mission of Jesus is clear from the opening verses through the concluding line of this passage:

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ² And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.

After spending some period of time in Galilee, Jesus crosses over the Sea of Galilee with His disciples, perhaps to spend some time alone, away from the crowds, or perhaps just to set up the situation that would prompt this dramatic miracle. A large crowd follows Him – and you have to believe that Jesus knew they were going to follow – putting themselves in unfamiliar territory some distance from home, in an area with a highly Gentile population.

Why would such a large group of Jewish people be willing to follow a man such a distance into such an area? John tells us it was “because they saw the signs he was doing on the sick.” Jesus was a remarkable miracle worker, One who did amazing signs. The people were fascinated, waiting to see what He would do next. They were partly testing Him, to see if He might indeed be the Messiah, and partly also hoping for some personal benefit from His signs. They would, in fact, get both of these things from Jesus, though they would misunderstand the true significance of Jesus’ actions.

B. The Distressed Disciples, vv. 3-9

We don’t have enough!

It soon becomes apparent that this large multitude of people are going to need food. Notice how carefully Jesus sets this up. By going up on a mountain with His disciples, He is ensuring that they will be able to see the full size of the crowd following them:

Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴ Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵ Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷ Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.” ⁸ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹ “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?”

Again, John tells us it is Passover. If the healing of the man at the pool in Jerusalem took place at Passover, then this is a full year later. This would make this Jesus’ third Passover in ministry – John 2, John 5 and John 6. He would have only one more, John 12-13, His final Passover. Much of the language in this passage is echoing language of Moses, which will become even more clear later in the chapter. But notice that Jesus had led a large group of people out into the wilderness, has gone up a mountain and will soon supernaturally provide them with food.

Jesus asks His disciples a question He knows they will be unable to answer: “*Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?*” He wants them to see the impossibility of the situation in front of them and the total inadequacy of their own resources. Philip answered, “*Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.*” This amount - 200 denari – represents 200 days’ wages for a working man. In Jesus’ day, most of a working man’s money was spent to feed his family. This crowd has 5,000 men, besides women and children, so it’s probably 5,000 families. That means that 200 denari would provide enough food for about 200-300 of these families, or not even enough for everyone in the crowd to get a bite. Philip’s precise response of 200 denari is probably an indication that that was the total amount of money they had with them. It probably seemed like a lot of money to them. They probably thought they were doing pretty well, until Jesus confronted them with this real and pressing need that far outstripped their resources, which suddenly seemed pathetic.

Andrew comes in and echoes the hopelessness by telling Jesus about a boy who is willing to give his lunch, but it’s only five barley loaves and two fish. Barley loaves were cheaper than wheat, and these are probably more like biscuits than full loaves of bread. The fish are probably small salted fish intended as a side dish. So, they have five cheap biscuits and two small salted fish. Andrew was right to ask, “*what are they for so many?*”

Sometimes we do find ourselves in desperate situations, where the need of the moment is far beyond our available resources. Aren't those the times when we truly and earnestly pray?

Well, the disciples don't pray here. They just don't know what to do, but Jesus is going to pray. And when Jesus prays, watch out!

C. The Satisfying Savior, vv. 10-13

Gather up the leftover fragments

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹² And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, "Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost." ¹³ So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

Notice some things about Jesus' actions: He had the people sit down. There was much grass in the place because it was Passover, springtime. He had them sit so they would be organized and the distribution could be orderly. We don't know how many people there were total, but the fact that Jesus could lead and organize and command 5,000 men is very significant. This crowd could quickly and easily be transformed into an impressive people's army.

Jesus then took the loaves and gave thanks. Notice that He thanked God publicly before He distributed the bread. His thanksgiving probably sounded like this: "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth." The traditional thanksgiving for the fish would have been very interesting, coming from the lips of Jesus: "Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, by Whose word all things came to be."

We're told twice that everyone ate as much as they wanted, that they ate their fill. Then, Jesus told His disciples to gather up the leftover pieces. All of the accounts of the feeding of the 5,000 are specific in telling us that 12 large baskets full of leftover pieces were collected. The baskets used here were wicker baskets, possible made of woven reeds. They probably held a little over a 1/2 bushel each, but it's the number of baskets and not their storage capacity that's important. 12 is the number associated in Scripture with the people of God – 12 tribes of Israel and 12 apostles. 12 baskets full, symbolizing enough for all the people of God.

Jesus' provision is abundant. Everyone is satisfied and there's enough left over to symbolize provision for all the people of God. Nothing goes to waste. Jesus is not being wasteful. He wants the leftovers collected so they may be eaten. But He is also not stingy; He is generous and He meets the need generously, in a way that shows His amazing, abundant power and provision.

D. The Misunderstanding Multitudes, vv. 14-15

Here is our Prophet-King!

The multitudes who have gathered for this meal are thrilled. They respond ecstatically: *When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"*

This is a very specific reference to Deuteronomy 18:15, when Moses, at the end of his life, told the people of God: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen" Over the centuries, this prophecy from Moses came to be seen as a Messianic promise: The promised prophet was the promised Messiah.

The credentials of Jesus as “the Prophet” were strengthened in the eyes of the people by the remarkable similarity between this miraculous sign and a miracle done by Elisha, one of the greatest of the prophets of God. In 2 Kings 4:42-44, we read of Elisha, who is called here “the man of God”:

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing the man of God bread of the firstfruits, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. And Elisha said, “Give to the men, that they may eat.”⁴³ But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” So he repeated, “Give them to the men, that they may eat, for thus says the LORD, ‘They shall eat and have some left.’”⁴⁴ So he set it before them. And they ate and had some left, according to the word of the LORD. (ESV)

The barley loaves and the leftovers are directly echoed in Jesus’ miracle, and yet Jesus’ miracle was so much greater. Elisha fed 100 men with 20 loaves of barley, but Jesus fed 5,000 with 5 loaves. If this miracle proved that Elisha was a prophet, then surely Jesus was The Prophet!

“The Prophet” was promised to be a prophet like Moses. Here the expectation of the people was clear: If Moses led the people of God out of the bondage of Egypt and into the Promised Land, then surely this Jesus, this Prophet more powerful than Elisha, could lead them to freedom from the Roman occupation and lead them to enjoy the full promise of the Promised Land. The fact that it was Passover only cemented the expectations of the people more clearly in their minds.

People want freedom and free food. In 2,000 years, we haven’t changed at all. Set us “free” from “oppression” and feed us and you’ll have our loyalty forever! Jesus fully intended to set His people free and to feed them with the bread of life, but He also knew that what they wanted and what they needed were light years apart. He was going to provide what they needed, but first He needed to deny them what they wanted.

So often, God must deny us what we want before He gives us what we need. We truly think that what we want is what we need, but God knows the difference.

So our passage ends with Jesus withdrawing again, this time completely alone. Not even His disciples are with Him: “Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” Jesus sends the disciples off to cross the Sea of Galilee by themselves and leaves the people alone, bellies full but expectations unmet, unsatisfied. The next time He sees the disciples, He will show them even more clearly who he really is, in a way that will leave them frightened and stunned. The next time He sees the crowd, He will tell them clearly who He really is, and it will shatter their expectations even more. But we’ll save those encounters for the next few weeks.

Conclusion: Seeing and Understanding the Abundant Goodness of Jesus

Have you seen the abundant goodness of Jesus in your life? Have you seen how marvelously and powerfully He meets every true need with overflowing grace? If you have not, could it be because your expectations of Jesus are so radically different from His priorities, His kingdom mission? If there is a large gap between what you’re expecting from Jesus and what He is actually committed to doing, then this is probably a good indication that an equally large gap exists between your felt needs and your actual needs, or between your needs and your wants. At the beginning, I asked, “How old were you when you realized that the things you want most in life are not the same as the things you most need?” Could it be that we still have not learned this lesson?

Our greatest need is to be forgiven and accepted by God, to be reconciled to a just and holy God whom we have offended by our sin and from Whom we have been alienated by our sinful nature and our active rebellion. Paul says of God in Romans 11, “For all things are from Him and through Him and to Him, to Him be the glory forever!” Yet we, in our sinful nature and our active rebellion, are estranged from Him, and under His just condemnation.

We come to see and understand the abundant goodness of Jesus only when we see that this is our true, pressing and urgent need and we also see how pathetically inadequate our own resources are at even beginning to meet this need. We don't even have 200 denari to feed a multitude. We don't even have five cheap biscuits and two small salted fish for thousands of people. When it comes to our standing before a holy, holy, holy God, we have nothing. Nothing but sin. Nothing but need. Nothing but lack. Nothing but guilt and offense.

Romans 5:20-21 says, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." This is the abundant goodness of our Savior, Jesus. He does deliver us from true bondage and oppression and He does feed us with the very best of bread, Himself! If you clearly see your need and you clearly understand your lack of resources to meet this need, come to Him and find Him to be abundantly good, fully able to satisfy!

My prayer for you, for all of us, is the prayer Paul prayed in Ephesians 3:14-19:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family^[c] in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

When we pray like that, God is pleased to answer that kind of prayer, and then we can sing and shout the doxology, the word of praise Paul exclaims right after this prayer:

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.