

Gospel of Matthew 15:20-

39

**How Many Loaves?  
4000-plus Fed!**





It seems as though I just taught on this text, but, no, it was a similar text in chapter 14, where Jesus fed the 5000 men plus women and children. So in our text for today, it is 4000 men plus women and children. It is a strange way to count a crowd by our way of thinking because it could be wildly inaccurate. We simply have no idea how many women and children were present that 1 day. They could have doubled the size of the crowd, or tripled, quadrupled it, or more! But this was another

huge crowd! Evidently they were all in a remote place near or along the northwestern shores of the big lake of Galilee called the Sea of Galilee, and most had been there for three days! It was still gentile territory, but I'm guessing that there would have been a heavier mix of Jews in the crowd the closer they moved toward the Lake. Many in this crowd had undoubtedly packed food along while others had not. I'm sure food had been shared, but now all food had run out some time ago. They certainly hadn't expected to be there as long as they had been. But their hunger pangs certainly made the crowd restless and the children cry and complain. It speaks to the spell-binding nature of what Jesus was doing there! [Vs. 30] I mean, just look at this list of Christ's activities! Who could turn away from such a spectacle, even for the uncomfortable pain of long-empty bellies!



Finally Jesus gathered His disciples/ helpers together and told them that He was aware that the people had not eaten in some time – some of them for perhaps as long as 3 days!! Seems strange that the disciples had not pulled

Jesus aside to remind Him of the people’s great hunger. In their defense, the idea of going without food for an extended time was not as foreign in that culture as it is to people in our culture today. As a nation, they observe the holy day “Yom Kippur” which means “Day of Atonement”. It was a day when people contemplated their sins and asked God and people for forgiveness. The idea was that by fasting for 24 hours the body would be made uncomfortable and the soul with it. That gnawing pain of physical hunger was supposed to remind people that they should feel a gnawing pain and guilt for their sins at a deep emotional level in their soul. They also wore white that day to symbolize their desire for purity.

Most of what I have seen of faith healers in my lifetime seems bogus to me. And many popular figures in this field have been exposed as frauds. It frustrates me to no end, because I don't want people to associate me with them in their minds – the Armani suits, wild claims, constant pleas for money, the bizarre mannerisms on stage, the strange spiritual manifestations. I've never understood the attraction to that type of show, or why they would ever trust someone like that! To me, the spectacle these characters create has had all the authenticity of professional wrestling! I grieve for those desperate people who arrive to these huge assemblies with so much hope, and leave terribly disappointed and disillusioned!



Vs. 31 - But look at what was happening *here*! A seemingly inexhaustible line of the “*lame, blind, crippled, mute...*” etc., were brought before Jesus by their loved ones and friends and laid there. And He healed them all! This was no fake showman cavorting and strutting up and down a stage making loud empty proclamations of healings that never happened! This was real! The **LAME** walked *and ran*, the **BLIND** had new and perfect eyes, the **CRIPPLED** had their limbs re-formed, literally *re-created* by the Creator into healthy functioning appendages, and the **MUTE** - those that had never spoken - spoke!

- “*...and He healed them... The people were amazed when they saw... and they praised the God of Israel!*”

This is what happens when God is at work! People look to God!

## Vs. 32 – “*I have compassion for these people*”

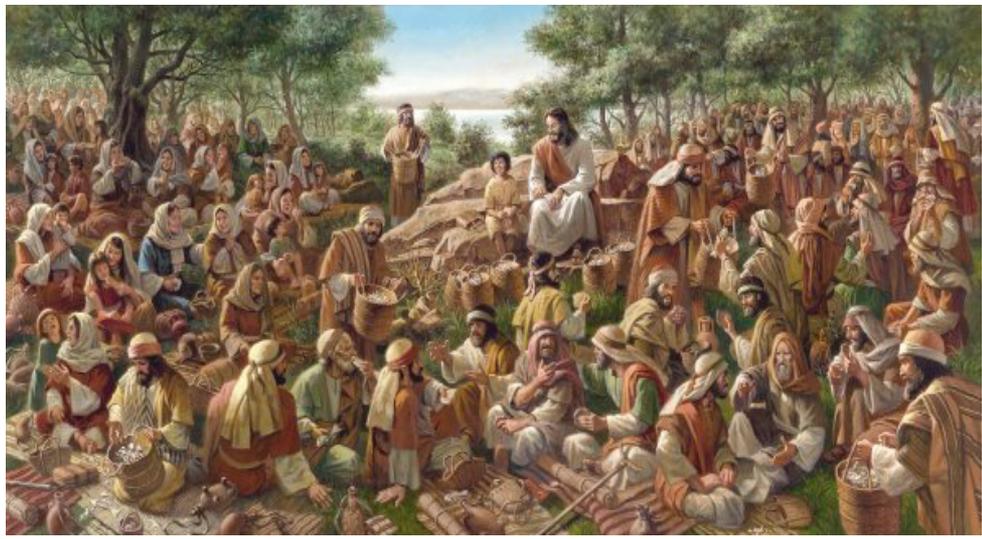
Jesus has been demonstrating compassion all along in these physically desperate people. **Compassion**, by definition, is “*the quality of understanding, and at some lesser but still substantial level, **feeling** the suffering of others, and wanting to do something to alleviate that suffering*”.



But now He feels the suffering of the entire crowd as their stomachs growl and as their mind and muscles register real pain and weakness that inevitably accompanies a prolonged fast! He is afraid someone might collapse on the way back home unless something is done!

What is interesting to me about this story is what the disciples ***do not*** say to their Master when he brings this up. They do not say to Him, “*Well then, why don’t you just do what you did before and multiply any bits of food we can find?*” In fact, this is the only reason why I can see Matthew includes two such similar miracles in his gospel – the feeding of the 5000 and then the 4000! I think his intent by including this second event, so much like the first, is to show us the fickle nature of the faith of even Christ’s disciples! After the first time of Jesus multiplying bread, their faith in the power and ability of Jesus should have soared! But here we are, back to square one - as if the first feeding had never happened. That had to be irritating for Jesus! What more could He do?! So I think this account of a second miraculous feeding is to demonstrate once again the typical humanity of Christ’s disciples. They were flawed humans, inanely normal as humans go (**inanely** means complacently, unselfconsciously foolish) constantly missing the obvious, self-blind, driven by hungers and passions, and not using or ***misusing*** their God-given intellect!

It was these typical humans – nothing particularly special about them – certainly not any particular spiritual giants among them at the time; it was these men that Jesus chose to accompany Him and invest His life into. Just normal human beings complete with



inherent failures of faith and reason at regular intervals! These would be the individuals that Jesus would trust to build His church! Imagine that! But these guys did not have the presence of mind to suggest that Jesus simply repeat His earlier miracle!

So they go through almost exactly the same routine as before. Jesus; *“These people need to be fed. How much food do we have?”* A disciple answers; *“Seven (loaves) and a few small fish”*

So Jesus gets the vast crowd to sit, He blesses the food, breaks it in pieces and just keeps filling up the baskets, which the disciples keep emptying and refilling for the hungry crowd. The entire crowd eats all they want. When they are done there’s seven basketfuls of this food left!

My takeaway from this parallel incident is mainly how common the disciples of Jesus were – how very human they could be! We like to think of them as super-human, but the record indicates that they were not! We think we don't compare – that we're not in the same league with these guys – we can't possibly follow Christ at a high level, right?! Wrong!!

**[1 Cor. 1:26-31]**

When Jesus calls us to follow Him, He does not require a degree in theology, or to even know our Bible. He doesn't require that the blood of the upper class flows in our veins. In fact, it is the poor and powerless that seem to respond to the gospel. Jesus said it is very hard, almost impossibly hard, for the rich, to respond affirmatively to the Gospel. Like I taught last week, the foundation of salvation is humility. It is especially hard for the rich to humble themselves, even before God and say that they were wrong. Their wealth makes it easier for them to live in their own fantasy world – to be completely self-deluded that they are in control of their own lives! But that is original sin! But reality is that we are all less than nothing! So, it seems that only the things that knock a person down in life can upset that delusion are things like poverty, tragedy, loss, failure, betrayal, and the like!



What does it say about the people that God chooses? How does Paul describe the followers of Jesus? In flowery terms? There are five descriptive ways to describe the those that have answered the call of Jesus and they are NOT favorable! **Foolish, weak, lowly, despised, the things that are not** – in other words - a thing that does not register on people's scale of what is valuable or important in this world! We don't even show up on that scale – we “*are not*”! So as we extend the invitation to follow Jesus it kind of sounds like one of those dumb medicine commercials you hear all the time on TV. Sure the medicine really helps the ailment,.. or,.. (in the interests of full disclosure) it could give you heart failure, diabetes, an itchy skin rash, epilepsy, gout, and a twitch in your eye! Hey - sign me right up, right?! Likewise, who wants to self-identify as a proud member of the foolish, weak, lowly, the despised, and the discounted? Those who want to follow Jesus do!



What I'm getting at here is don't sell yourself short! We are not big super people or even super Christians! We are regular people, flawed people that Jesus has elected to use to accomplish something truly special! If we were something special to begin with, we would constantly want to keep falling back on serving the purposes of Jesus in our own strength and ability, and God simply will not have it! He must be the power that transcends our limitations! All we do is open ourselves to Him, going to Him constantly, making our requests in the Name of Jesus!

One last thing. If you do not have ambitions to serve Jesus, to accomplish something of importance within His purposes, to influence and win people to Jesus as He has commissioned us,.. then you should not need to experience any of His power. That's a fact! The power of God comes to us on the basis of need. When you have immersed yourself in serving Jesus and backed yourself into an uncomfortable corner where you no longer feel adequate, then you will get what you need to make it through, battle through the difficulties, complete your task and do it well!



The difficulties usually have to do with working with people when you are serving Jesus and trying to accomplish something that has to do with His kingdom! That is especially when you must throw yourself upon the Spirit of God asking Him for His love, His joy, His peace, His patience, His kindness, His goodness, His faithfulness, and His self-control! When you cannot be discouraged from what you are doing while serving Jesus; when you cannot be shaken from your course by the discouragement of other people, who generally are not actually *TRYING* to discourage you, (but are); when you are truly serving Jesus and seeking your approval from Him and not other people; then He will give you grace to help you accomplish and succeed beyond your wildest dreams the satisfying, significant things he has called such a common person as yourself and myself to accomplish!₉



We will all have our failures. The disappointing nature of being a human being is that we are cyclical people – almost in a bi-polar sense. We experience cycles of strong faith followed by seasons of discouragement and even doubt, followed by renewal and strength! We experience **guilt/distance**, and then the relief of God’s forgiveness, followed by more guilt/distance, followed by more forgiveness and closing the

distance! We feel the generous and warm gush of love for our Christian brothers and sisters and then we feel the icy fingers of suspicion/disappointment/frustration, followed again by reconciliation and the joy and warmth of restoration! We experience victory over sin and then failure and then victory and maybe failure again followed by more victory!

We learn through these cycles to give each other great grace, the benefit of the doubt, to smile genuinely when someone says exactly the wrong thing and to love them still – just as we ourselves are loved by Jesus! All of this requires the transforming power of Jesus! But to actually engage the transformative power of Jesus one must be engaged in the purposes of God, serving Jesus – not people pleasing; playing in the actual game rather than preferring to sit on the sidelines!