

The Compassionate Shepherd: Mark 6:30-44
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Our passage for this morning is a familiar one to many of us. If you grew up going to Sunday School, you probably heard this story multiple times. If you are familiar with the Bible, if you have attended church, then you are most likely very familiar with many of the details of this particular miracle of Jesus. It is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four Gospels. It's the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand.

My hope and prayer this morning is that the familiarity of this event will not breed contempt. We saw at the beginning of chapter 6 how familiarity breeds contempt. Jesus was rejected in His hometown. The challenge for some this morning will be to consider this familiar story with an attentive mind and a heart eager to believe and rejoice in who Jesus is.

The thing we see about Jesus in this passage is that He is a compassionate shepherd. He cares for people. He provides for people. In these verses we see His compassion directed at two groups of people: the disciples and the crowd. He is a compassionate shepherd for the twelve apostles (the twelve disciples). And He is a compassionate shepherd for the crowds of people who are flocking to see Him. Jesus is the compassionate shepherd.

Verse 30 concludes the account of what happened in verses 7-13. Jesus sent out the twelve apostles to teach and heal and cast out demons, and now they return. The verses in between (verses 14-29) told of John's death. John the Baptist, a righteous man, was put to death at the hands of lawless men. At Herod's banquet things got out of hand, Herodias took advantage of the situation, Herod made a rash oath and couldn't back down because he was such a people-pleaser, and the end result was that John's head was brought in on a platter. That was Herod's banquet. That's the kingdom of man. Gluttony, lust, pride, selfishness, the fear of man, bitterness, revenge, and it resulted in the death of a righteous man.

That account is followed immediately by the story of a very different banquet—a banquet that represents not the kingdom of man, but the kingdom of God. At this banquet Jesus is the center of attention. All eyes are on Him. He is the host of the banquet and the source of every provision for the banquet. In contrast to King Herod, Jesus is the true King. Herod wanted the prestige and power of being called King, but the people were like sheep without a shepherd. They had no leader. They had no King. Herod didn't care about them. But Jesus came to them as the compassionate

shepherd. He taught them and provided for them and pointed to that which would satisfy them eternally. This is what the kingdom of God is like. It may not resemble the kinds of things we would associate with royalty. But everyone must admit that this banquet is far more glorious than anything Herod ever experienced. This is the supernatural power of God breaking into history to attest to the identity of Jesus, the Messiah. He is the compassionate shepherd who is also omnipotent and therefore able to care for His sheep.

The Compassionate Shepherd (of the Twelve)

Let's start by looking at how Jesus is a compassionate shepherd to the twelve disciples. Jesus here feeds the five thousand, but so much of this passage has to do with the disciples. It begins with the disciples returning to Jesus after their mission throughout the surrounding towns. And Jesus immediately shows His compassion toward them in suggesting that they come away by themselves to a desolate place and rest a while. Jesus knew their needs. He knew the exhaustion they were experiencing after such an intense time of ministry. Jesus shows Himself here as their compassionate shepherd.

The second part of verse 31 explains why they were in such desperate need of rest. "For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." That's how wildly popular Jesus was. People came from all over, and they pressed in to try to see Jesus, hear Jesus, be healed by Jesus, so much so that Jesus and the disciples couldn't even find the time or space to sit down and have a meal. There was a mention of this back in Mark 3:20. "[Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat." This is the situation again in chapter 6. So Jesus seeks to provide His disciples with some rest. He wants them to be able to be by themselves for a time and to eat a meal.

They got in the boat, then, and went away to a desolate place by themselves. The problem was by the time they got there they couldn't be by themselves. The crowds were so eager to be with Jesus that they ran along the shore all the way around to where the boat arrived on the other side. This would have been a major interruption in the minds of the disciples. They thought they were going to finally have a little peace and quiet, a little time to themselves, a little rest and relaxation. But they arrive, and there's already a crowd of people there. And they notice that many of the faces are the same faces they had just seen on the other side of the lake. The disciples might have been at their wit's end. Can't they do anything to get away from the relentless crowds? Their hopes of rest were shattered. They couldn't find any rest here.

Or could they? The twelve certainly didn't get the kind of rest they had in mind. They weren't by themselves. But Jesus did

show them a profound picture of rest, as we'll see. Let's look at the interaction between the disciples and Jesus which starts in verse 35. This conversation goes back and forth three times—first the disciples, then Jesus. The disciples first speak to Jesus, and they tell Him what He should do. “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. *Send them away* to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” The disciples felt like they knew what needed to happen in this situation. This was the practical thing to do. And it was also an opportunity for them to get the rest they had been hoping for. If Jesus would just command everyone to leave, maybe they could finally get some down time!

That wasn't Jesus' plan, though. He answers them in verse 37, “You give them something to eat.” Given the situation, it may sound like Jesus is being insensitive to His disciples' needs. It may seem like He's being uncaring, unloving. But He is the compassionate shepherd, not only to the crowd but to His disciples. He has a profound lesson to teach His disciples here. And if they had eyes to see they would have realized that there was, in fact, rest to be found in that event.

In the second interchange of this conversation the disciples state the impossibility of what Jesus is asking them to do. They speak facetiously, almost mockingly, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” 200 denarii was a lot of money. One denarius was the equivalent of a day's wages for a day laborer. So we're talking about 200 days' wages to feed this crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. That was the disciples' estimate. Are you telling us, Jesus, that you want us to go out and spend that ridiculous amount of money just so we can have this massive crowd continue to interrupt our time of rest? That was the frustration in their voices as they responded to Jesus. They don't have that kind of money. Even if they did, how would they transport that much food in a timely manner? It was as if they were saying, “Jesus, you must be crazy if you think we're going to feed them. We have neither the resources nor the ability nor the desire to do so.”

You've heard it said that people can be so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good. Well the disciples in this case are so earthly minded that they are no heavenly good. They are so practically minded that they can't even conceive of carrying out Jesus' instructions for them. Apply these things to your own heart as we're considering them in the text. Do you ever get so wrapped up in the practical details of Kingdom work that you end up telling Jesus, “that's impossible”? Practicality is a good thing. We certainly need to think practically and act prudently and plan

carefully. But let us be warned here never to shake our finger in Jesus' face and say, "You're crazy! That's impossible!"

What's so awesome about this event is that Jesus commands the disciples to do something they cannot do, and then He does it for them and through them. What a beautiful portrait of the Christian life. This is what it is to be a Christian. God commands us to do things that are impossible for us to do. And then He accomplishes those things for us and in us and through us. "Repent and believe" (Mark 1:15). We cannot do that. In our depravity, we have no ability or desire to repent and believe. But God has given us a new heart. He regenerated us. For those who do have a desire to repent and believe, God did that work in our hearts.

Take another command. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). We cannot do those things. Our hearts are focused inward. We are self-focused and self-serving creatures until God makes us new creations in Him. And then we do delight in Him, and we do so increasingly as He sanctifies us, and that delight in Him spills over in love toward others.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28: 19-20). Again, we don't have the resources or the abilities or the desire to do these things, unless God does it in us and through us.

We could consider many more commands in the same way. Let me mention just one more. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord (Ephesians 5). We don't have it in us to do these things. We can't flip a switch in our hearts that will give us the desire and the ability to do this. Therefore we need to cry out to God for help.

Some have objected to the idea that God commands things that are impossible for us to do. Pelagius, back in the early 400s A. D., contended that God can only hold us responsible for things that we actually have the ability to do. Pelagius said that God would only command us to do things that we have the power to do. But that simply doesn't square with the teaching of Scripture. There are many commands in Scripture, and yet it's clear that in our flesh we are utterly unable to obey any of those commands. Romans 8:7-8, for instance, is so clear. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Our fighter verse for this week is also an illustration of this. In

John 15:5 Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Is that discouraging to you? Is it discouraging to you that you can't do anything apart from Christ? It shouldn't be discouraging. Because the corresponding truth is that with Christ we can do everything! Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

So here are the disciples, assuming that the Lord's command is utterly impossible. But they are about to be used by the Lord to accomplish that very task. They cannot do what He has commanded, and it's right for them to recognize that. Their fault is that they don't ask Jesus for help.

You see, we need to recognize our *inability* to obey, but we also need to take seriously our *responsibility* to obey. Even though we can't do it, we must do it. And then we must celebrate God's ability to do these things through us, and that should cause us to cry out to Him for help. This is what Augustine affirmed in a well-known quote from his *Confessions*. It was Augustine whom Pelagius was reacting against, and this is one of the lines that infuriated Pelagius. Augustine wrote, in a prayer to God: "Grant what You command, and command what You will." In other words, give me the grace to heed Your commands, and command whatever You will, even though it's impossible for me to do on my own.

This is the attitude the disciples should have embraced, but didn't, at least not yet. All they could see was impossibility. There's an interesting statement in John's account of this miracle. In John 6:5-6 it's recorded that "Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do." Jesus knew He was going to feed the crowd in a miraculous way, but He was shepherding the hearts of His disciples. He is the compassionate shepherd, wanting to provoke their hearts to consider who He is and what He can do. He wants them to trust in Him. He wants them to look to Him for help. He wants them to rely fully on Him.

Back in Mark 6, following the disciples' cynical remark in verse 37, Jesus responds in verse 38 with another command for them—a simpler, more straight-forward command. "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." They did as He said, and came back with the answer, "Five, and two fish." Then in verse 39 Jesus "commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass." This dialogue began with the disciples commanding Jesus to send the people away to get food for themselves, and the dialogue ends with Jesus commanding everyone to sit down because He's about to feed them. The disciples thought they had a plan. It was a

practical plan. It was a somewhat self-serving plan, but also a perfectly legitimate plan—a reasonable plan. But they had blinders on that kept them from seeing the Master’s plan. They couldn’t imagine that the omnipotent and compassionate shepherd, Jesus, might do something astounding. They couldn’t imagine anything like what was about to happen.

It’s interesting the way the miracle, itself, is described. In a way, it’s not described at all. The specifics of how the five loaves and two fish became enough to feed thousands is not told. It doesn’t say that Jesus made hundreds of baskets appear that were full of bread and fish. It doesn’t say that bread and fish fell from the sky. Jesus could have done it in these ways. But it just says that “Jesus looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.” And then we’re simply told that they all ate and were satisfied. He just broke the bread and divided the fish, and apparently He kept breaking the bread and dividing the fish, and there was still more bread and more fish, until everyone ate and was satisfied.

I think the significance of how Jesus performed this particular miracle is that it focused the attention on Himself and vividly illustrated what He said the next day, when He said, “I am the bread of life.” That’s recorded in John 6:35. The bread that satisfied their hunger came from the One who is the bread of life. And the bread came from Him mysteriously, miraculously, as though it was His own life that He was breaking and giving to the people. The bread came from Him in such a way that this miracle would be the perfect backdrop for the statement, “I am the bread of life.” I’ll say more about that as we prepare for the Lord’s Supper in a few moments.

Finally, the disciples collected twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. This is yet another carefully orchestrated piece of Jesus’ plan in this. He is leading His disciples as their compassionate shepherd, wanting to test them and teach them, and this was the final piece of the miracle that was meant to bring the lesson home. He wanted each one of them (all twelve of them) to be able to fill a basket full of leftovers as a clear demonstration of Jesus’ power and provision. As they stood there afterwards, each of them holding a basket overflowing with food, they should have been thinking about how they scoffed at Jesus’ command to them. They should have been realizing that the impossible command was entirely possible with Jesus. What they could not do, Jesus did. And He didn’t “just barely” do it. He over did it. Everyone ate their fill, and there were plenty of leftovers.

The disciples should have been amazed also at the fact that Jesus used them as an integral part of the plan. They distributed

the food, and now they're cleaning up the leftovers. They thought they were missing out on the rest they had been hoping for. But they got something better instead. They got to experience a taste of heaven right here on earth. Thousands upon thousands of people, gathered from various places, all with their attention on Jesus Christ who is supernaturally and gloriously providing for all their needs. That's real rest. To be with Jesus, observing His glory and power up close, being satisfied in the One who is the bread of life. That's true rest. That's the rest we look forward to in heaven.

We've seen in these ways how Jesus is the compassionate shepherd for His disciples. Let me briefly point out a few things as well about how He is the compassionate shepherd for the crowd.

The Compassionate Shepherd (of the crowd)

Three things briefly. First, Jesus has compassion on them. This is one of the most striking statements in this passage. As we read in verse 33 of these folks who run to meet Jesus on the other side of the lake, they're portrayed as an overbearing crowd that won't even let Jesus and His disciples get away for some rest. The disciples would have been frustrated with this crowd. Even we, as readers, are frustrated with them. We want to say to them, "Get a clue! They're trying to get away. They don't want to be with you anymore!" But Jesus is full of surprises—wonderful surprises. He doesn't send them away. He doesn't rebuke them. He has compassion on them, because they are like sheep without a shepherd. So He becomes their compassionate shepherd. This is our Savior, our precious Savior. He is so tender-hearted. He is so loving. He cares for those in need. His heart breaks to see people wandering astray like this, without direction or meaning, without a shepherd to lead them.

Secondly, Jesus teaches them. This is a primary way that He shepherds them. In Luke's account of this event it says that Jesus "spoke to them of the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:11). That's what Jesus was always teaching about. From the beginning of His public ministry, as Mark recorded in chapter 1:14-15, "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus was a compassionate shepherd to the crowd by speaking to them of the kingdom of God. He called people to repent of their sin and embrace the Good News of the Gospel. That is compassion. Some call that hateful and narrow-minded and insensitive and divisive. But we see it here in the most compassionate man who has ever walked the face of the earth.

Thirdly, Jesus provided for their practical needs. He fed them. They were out in the middle of nowhere, and apparently only one mother remembered to send her boy with a lunch that

day. Everyone else was so focused on the opportunity to see Jesus that they didn't give a thought to what they would do for dinner. But Jesus fed them. His compassion for them overflowed in teaching them the truth and feeding them dinner.

I hope your faith is encouraged through this event in the ministry of Jesus. I hope you're moved by the compassion of our Savior—the compassion He demonstrated for His disciples and the compassion He showed toward the crowd. He is the compassionate shepherd.

He also shows Himself here as the bread of life, which is an image for us to meditate on as we partake of the Lord's Supper. In John 6:35 Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Then several verses later He said, "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51). Jesus gave His own flesh, His own life, as a sacrifice for our sin. His body was broken for us.

The feeding of the five thousand points us to the last supper. At the last supper Jesus fed His disciples, and He did some of the very same things He did at the meal we've read about today. Mark 6:41, from our passage today, says, "And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people." Now listen to the very similar wording of Mark 14:22, when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. "And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'" Jesus fed the five thousand with the bread that multiplied in His hands as He broke it. And the next day He told them, "I am the bread of life." And "the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Then, at the last supper, He fed His disciples. And after giving them the bread that He broke with His hands, He told them, "this is my body."

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper now, let us feed on Christ. Let us be satisfied in Him. For if we come to Him we will not hunger. If we believe in Him we will never thirst. If you are believing in Him, eat of this meal. And as you eat, think of our compassionate shepherd, who gave Himself for us on the cross, that we might be satisfied in Him.