

March 13, 2011

# *Come to a Desolate Place and Eat the Real Thing*

Mark 6:30-44

## INTRODUCTION

This story represents one of at least two miraculous, mass feedings by Jesus. John's Gospel gives us a lot of theological interpretation in Chapter 6. There we find one of the clearest statements of what we have been saying the whole time: that the physical provisions of Jesus are signs that point back to himself and the salvation that He brings. So, for example, after He had performed this miracle of feeding the five thousand, Jesus reproved them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you" [6:26-27].

- THE CALLING OF THE SHEPHERDS AND COMPASSION FOR THE SHEEP
- JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE IN THE BASKETS OF THE CHURCH

**The Big Idea** is that the Word became Bread for us to point back up to the Word.

Now there is undoubtedly a blending of metaphors here, because shepherds don't feed their sheep bread or fish! So don't mix the metaphors; instead see what the shepherd-sheep imagery and the bread-and-fish imagery have in common.

## DOCTRINE

### I. THE CALLING OF THE SHEPHERDS AND COMPASSION FOR THE SHEEP

#### A) The Church Separates from the World to Receive {30-32}

1. *The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught (30).* Remember the disciples had been sent out and that is what the word "apostle" means—ones who are sent out with a royal message—so they came back excited and perhaps wanting help to do better in the future. This is **prayer** also: to bring before God everything we have been doing in his name and confessing all we have been trying to do in our own power. Now

what is Jesus' remedy for their exhaustion? More of himself: *And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while."* For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. *And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves (31-32).* So Mark paints the picture of no time to lick wounds or celebrate victories or gain more knowledge, so even while more people continue to press in, Jesus says, 'It's time for a retreat.' And there is no need to think that this does not include a time of physical rest.

2. Twice here it says that this is a **desolate place** which is usually symbolic, in Scripture, of either alienation or separateness. When churches plan retreats they don't usually pick the middle of the wilderness. But here is the point: Jesus knows full well that their time together would constantly be interrupted; but He knows that it's worth it to set a pattern for us. So what pattern does this set for us—the followers of Jesus always running ahead or going in secret study with him? The simple answer is that if you are going to serve God up to others or to represent him to others, then you have to **know him yourself**. And not only that; but to spend time alone with God is to make anything in the world—no matter how it glitters and glows—seem like a desolate place by comparison to the presence of God. And one brief, interrupted moment with God is worth more than a million hours of your own strength and ingenuity: it is sweeter, more powerful, more of a reminder of what we really long for to be with God in prayer and meditating upon his word and even though interrupted it is enough to sustain us and refresh us to serve again. If earthly friendship and earthly love are expressed in persons mutually agreeing for their whole persons to be there with each other, how much more should Jesus and his beloved act like this toward each other!

You have said, "Seek my face." My heart says to you, "Your face, LORD, do I seek" [Ps. 27:8].

3. Now this may seem forced, but notice that when Jesus teaches the disciples, He brings them directly to himself. You may say, "Well, that is just because Jesus was physically there with them for three years." But of course you forget that we have the Holy Spirit inside of us. This doesn't minimize books either. Jesus and the disciples read the Old Testament Scriptures and He even knew the rabbinical traditions outside of the Scriptures because He is shown criticizing them specifically in Matthew's Gospel. The point is that there is a massive difference between knowing *about* God from afar, and knowing *him*. In his classic *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer says that, "when people know God, losses and 'crosses' cease to matter to

them; what they have gained simply banishes these things from their minds. What other effects does knowledge of God have on a person?”<sup>1</sup> Packer lists four basic things:

- 1) Those who know God have **great energy** for God.
- 2) Those who know God have **great thoughts** of God.
- 3) Those who know God show **great boldness** for God.
- 4) Those who know God have **great contentment** in God.

Now you will have to read Packer’s book for yourself to see how he draws those four effects of knowing God out; but for our study today, it is enough to say that these are a few things that these disciples are going to need—great energy, great thoughts, great boldness, great contentment—and these four great things so necessary to the mission can only be found in one activity: *knowing God in being with Christ*. That is the basic reason that Jesus invites them on this retreat.

#### B) The Church Looks Back Out at the World in Compassion {33-34}

1. In reality, in this lifetime, retreats are very, very temporary: *Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them (33)*. Before, the place was desolate, but at least it was simplified. Now it was a wilderness filled with broken people. I say that ‘the church looks back out at the world in compassion,’ but this text only speaks of Jesus doing so. But that is the point. The example of Jesus’ very big view and big heart is an example for us. He knows that every time He sees this crowd his heart will explode in love toward them *AND* He never sees that as contradictory to his passion to gather a core of disciplined ones to teach them more and more.

2. So ultimately the ‘desolate’ setting does not matter. What matters is that even these disciples knew that they had to get back to the Master’s school in order to get back to work, to “be ready in season and out of season” [2 Tim. 4:2], to “serve in the strength that God supplies” [1 Pet. 4:11]. Remember that the undershepherds of the Good Shepherd are first called ‘disciples’ which means *student*. Bad undershepherds will not go to the Good Shepherd for more instruction: “For the shepherds are stupid and do not inquire of the LORD; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered” [Jer. 10:21]. So we have all the reason in the world to think that this school going on for these three years was a

---

<sup>1</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove IL 1973); p. 27

Shepherds College. The next words tell us. *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd (34)*. Again, this was not a new thought. This was a tendency in Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, in an earlier account, it says that while He was going through the cities,

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" [9:36-38].

3. When the Good Shepherd has us appeal to the Father for more undershepherds, He also models to us what a good shepherd does: *And he began to teach them many things (34b)*. So notice the strong connection between having a heart for God's flock and having a single-minded jealousy for the teaching. The rest of this story is going to give us some huge clues as to that connection. After the Apostle Paul had spent three years of schooling on the undershepherds of Ephesus, he gathered them together and said these two things:

Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you **the whole counsel of God**. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care for** the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. And now I commend you **to God** and **to the word** of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified [Acts 20:26-32].

So the basic connection between what Jesus was going to do on this private retreat for the disciples and the stuff of Jesus' compassion for the scattered sheep was the content of the Word. The undershepherds needed more of it, more deeply, more precise, refined, systematized, ready to feed others for the sake of these crowds that were swarming in on them. Now the imagery is about to shift, but the basic idea is the same.

## II. JESUS IS THE BREAD OF LIFE IN THE BASKETS OF THE CHURCH

### A) Our Focus on Material Resources {35-40}

1. *And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late (35)*. The first resource that causes disbelief is time. We know we have little of it

and so we are anxious. The disciples were probably already annoyed that their retreat-slash-seminar was cut short. So they repeated the obvious: ‘We’re in the middle of nowhere and a whole lot of nothing is still happening!’ That isn’t a rare thing among God’s people. Think of the Israelites who were invited out into the wilderness by their prophet from God.

They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness? He struck the rock so that water gushed out and streams overflowed. Can he also give bread or provide meat for his people?” [Ps. 78:18-20]

The main difference here is that the disciples weren’t like Moses in going directly to God for provision. Instead their solution was to say to Jesus, *Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat (36).*

2. What Jesus does next is not meant to say to us: “where there’s a will there’s a way.” In fact, speaking of Moses, this is really similar to God’s call for him to go and speak to Pharaoh and his own unbelieving response. “The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, ‘A staff’” [Ex. 4:2]. And you will remember that with that staff God showed his power through Moses; but was that because there was any inherent magic in the staff? Of course not! Likewise with what Jesus is about to have the disciples do: *But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish” (37-38).* So Moses had a stick to shake at the world’s most powerful man; the disciples had five loaves of bread and two fish to divide between five thousand people. Clearly the odds are bad so that there would be no mistake where the power is coming from.

3. Now throughout the Bible, bread is always a symbol of the presence of God or the word of God and fish are a symbol for believers: “And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” [Deut. 8:3]. Jesus himself was the fulfillment of this since He is called the Word and the true Bread that comes down from heaven [cf. Jn. 1:1, 14]—Jesus said to them on this occasion, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” [Jn. 6:35]. So Jesus gives of himself, the Word, and then arranges the rest of the gathering into small groups—*Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties*

(39-40). He arranges them in smaller groups, not to talk about ‘what this bread means to them,’ but, to receive smaller manageable portions of this same bread.

### B) God Gives to Us to Serve His Own Resources {41-43}

1. Now notice that the Good Shepherd breaks down the Bread in front of them all, then gives it to the undershepherds to hand out in manageable bite-sized chunks. This is identical to what the church would do week after week since then: *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. And he divided the two fish among them all (41)*. Please do not miss that in doing things exactly in this way Jesus is keeping himself central. How we do church always makes a theological statement. Everything always says something about God. The only question is whether we will be making the same statements that Jesus himself made or not.

2. *And they all ate and were satisfied (42)*. Starve yourself from the word of God for a while, then come back to it and it is like water when you are dehydrated. So what is it about this bread that would be ultimately satisfying? Again John 6 gives us a deeper interpretation of this event. Some of the Jews there that were fed understood enough to remember that there was a connection between the bread that comes down from God back in Deuteronomy and the prophet that was to come. Some reacted in this way: “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” [Jn. 6:14]. And Jesus doesn’t correct them. He affirms their basic understanding that this bread was about him by going deeper, by giving them more of the real bread, namely more of his Word to hear and understand and believe:

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” [Jn. 6:47-51].

So Jesus is saying that when the Word became flesh He also became “bread” for us—truth that would explain to our minds and hearts who He is and what He would do for us—and that last part is crucial. At the heart of who Jesus is for us and what He does for us is how the “bread” of his flesh would be broken for us. If we see that and treasure it, we live and we will always be satisfied. If we choke on it and yawn and roll our eyes and turn away, we will die as surely as the Israelites who ate the manna in the wilderness died.

3. *And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men (43-44).* In multiplying the bread, He multiplies the fish. Notice that He does not call himself “the fish that came down from heaven,” but only the bread. We have already seen that in Acts one of the ways that Luke describes the church multiplying was that, “the word of God increased and multiplied” [Acts 12:24]; “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” [6:7]. So though it is true (as John tells us) the vast majority of this crowd went away disbelieving, still the only way the true gathering will be assembled and multiplied is by this bread.

So to repeat the **Big Idea**: the Word became Bread for us to point back up to the Word.

## APPLICATION

**To the Undershepherd** – Do you ever get the sense that it’s getting late and we’re in the middle of nowhere and “nothing is happening”? Well Jesus would point to the bread that He’s given you and feed you and then have you multiply that. But just like the disciples were students before they were apostles, so the undershepherds have to be in school the whole time that they are sent on a mission. So what ingredients are you feeding with? What power are you trying to multiply with? At The Well we have provided an institution that is modeled with all this in mind—The Shepherds College—and I challenge anyone called to shepherd and feed others to benefit from it. The next class in our summer semester will be Christology, or the Doctrine of Christ. Please consider attending.

**To the ‘Starving Seeker’** – When you hear Jesus’ interpreting words in John 6 to these crowds, how do you take them to heart? Do you understand what He means when He warns us not to come to him to “have our fill” but to see the signs pointing upward, outward, away from our self-centered, passing-away, perceived psychological needs and toward an infinite provision? I personally do not mind the talk about “Seekers,” so long as we only define that as one thing—someone who the Holy Spirit has awakened and set on a hungry path to God’s Word. But if you want to define “Seeker” some other way and define Jesus as satisfying some lesser thing, well, then Jesus would tell you that you are not wandering around because you are seeking; you are wandering because you are starving. And you may be curious enough to join a crowd every once in a while; but the question you have to ask yourself this morning is: *Am I hungry enough* to “Taste and see that the Lord is good” [Ps. 34:8].