

**Mark:  
Feeding a Multitude**

**Mark 6:30-44**

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Please turn with me to the Gospel of Mark, and chapter six, beginning at verse 30. We have something like seven or eight stories in chapters six and seven and eight of Mark's gospel, all of them dealing with a very common theme: Who is Jesus Christ?

It's an evangelistic theme. It's a theme that Mark is trying to unpack as he tells us the story, the familiar story of the gospel. And we come to perhaps one of the most familiar stories of all. Even those who are biblically illiterate know, I think, something of this particular story: namely, the feeding of the five thousand.

Don't get confused in the first verse of chapter eight of Mark's gospel. If you want to turn the page to that, you may have a heading that will tell you that there's the story of Jesus feeding the four thousand.

Actually there are six stories in the gospels, four relating this particular story feeding the five thousand in all four of the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John); and then Mark and Luke also give us an extra story of Jesus' feeding the four thousand. It's not the same story. If you went to school or college and there were folks who tried to tell you it's just the same story, it's just that Mark got the numbers wrong—Mark would have to be pretty much of a fool from chapter six to chapter eight to forget that he's already told the story two chapters before, only there he said five thousand, and now he says four thousand. No, this was one of those occasions when Jesus repeated a very similar miracle. The fact that this miracle occurs six times and is recorded six times in the gospels tells us something about how important the early church, and the apostles in particular, felt the story to be. It teaches us something very, very important. Well, turn with me, then, to Mark chapter six, and beginning to read at verse thirty. Before we read the passage, let's pray together.

*Lord, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You for these gospels. We thank You for the Gospel of Mark, and we thank You especially for preserving for us this beautiful story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand. We think we know this story well, but we need Your help, Holy Spirit, to bring out its true meaning. And*

*so illuminate the meaning of these words now to us as we read this word which You have caused to be written, and kept pure through the ages. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Hear with me the word of God.

The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)

They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves. The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them. When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and He began to teach them many things. When it was already quite late, His disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and it is already quite late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." But He answered them, "You give them something to eat!" And they said to Him, "Shall we go and spend two hundred denarii on bread and give them something to eat?" And He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go look!" And when they found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." And He commanded them all to sit down by groups on the green grass. They sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food and broke the loaves and He kept giving them to the disciples to set before them; and He divided up the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up twelve full baskets of the broken pieces, and also of the fish. There were five thousand men who ate the loaves.

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now we need to remind ourselves of the context. Jesus, you remember, in the earlier part of chapter six and back into the end of chapter five of Mark's gospel, Jesus had sent the apostles, the disciples on a preaching tour—an evangelistic campaign, if you like. They were sent two by two into all the towns and villages of Galilee. It's hard to be certain about this. The mathematician in me doodled a little, and examined some commentaries, and some are suggesting that this might have taken upwards of six to nine months to do, going into all the villages. You remember some of the instructions Jesus gave them: that if they were not to be received, they were to shake off the dust from off their feet and so on. But if they were to be received, maybe they would spend several days, maybe upwards of a week, maybe a couple of weeks, in these villages, going from door to door. Perhaps meeting in the local marketplace, wherever people gathered,

congregated together—depending perhaps on the weather, the climate. Perhaps taking some days of rest and refreshment for prayer and for encouragement of one another. It would take some time for these disciples to go through all of the towns and villages of Galilee.

Well, the result of all of that is, they've come back and, as the text tells us in the opening verse in verse 30, they're reporting to Jesus. We don't know whether Jesus actually went with them, whether He went with some of them, whether He moved about from one place to the other, as probably was the case; but now they're all back together and they're reporting, as missionaries do, I imagine, when they gather together for a conference from various parts of Europe, maybe of Greece or whatever. They report to each other. It's one of those times that's often discouraging on the one hand, and sometimes it's a time of enormous encouragement to see what God has been doing.

In the meantime, something terrible has happened. One of the saddest events in the gospels, apart from the death of our Savior: the beheading—it's come home to us again this week, hasn't it? I think, as it happens, when I preached on the death of John the Baptist, there was another on that occasion. There we are. We're right in the middle of this in our own minds and in our own hearts this evening.

John the Baptist, the beloved man, this great, great man; this pinnacle that God raises up to usher in, inaugurate the New Covenant era; to be the one who would usher in the coming of Jesus Christ; this extraordinary preacher, whom God blessed abundantly: this man has been killed. Herod has had this man's head taken off at the whim of a young girl. And no doubt the disciples are discussing that, too. And as they're congregating—and no doubt they've congregated somewhere near the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, because in a minute they're going to get into a boat, so they must have been on the edge of the shore. Maybe they're in Capernaum, which would be the home base for Jesus and for some of the disciples. That's where they lived—great crowds, throngs are gathered, and they can't have this time of refreshment and rest, and more than that, there's this little detail that they hadn't eaten. Mark records it in a parenthetical remark at the end of verse 31. There are many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.

And the “they” there could refer to the throng of people, but more than likely it refers to the disciples and Jesus. They haven't had time to eat yet, and they need this time together. And Jesus bids them go into one of these fishing boats, and to cross the northern part of the Sea of Galilee.

We're not told in Mark exactly where they land, but Luke tells us that they landed in Bethsaida, which would be on the sort of north, slightly to the east, of the Sea of Galilee. Well, those of you who have been to Israel and you've been up on the northern shore of Galilee, you've been to Capernaum, perhaps you can see it in your mind now, as I can—Galilee is not such a big lake. It's a big lake, but it's not

that big. You can see the other side of it. And you can see this little boat. Wherever that boat was, on a clear blue day like today you'd be able to see this boat. And if you had good vision, you might even be able to detect there's Jesus, and there's disciples! And what are they doing? Well, they're following along the shoreline. The boat wouldn't be moving that quickly, and it would be easy enough, and in fact, they got there before the boat got there!

So Jesus' desire to get to a lonely place so that He and the disciples could have some rest and refreshment and food, it all comes to nothing because this great crowd, this throng, this mass of people have followed them. And Jesus does something. He sees this great crowd now as sheep without a shepherd. And He teaches them and He feeds them. Now I want us to see three very simple things.

### **I. First of all, I want us to see Jesus' compassion.**

Jesus' compassion. It's the word Mark employs in verse 34. He felt compassion for them, for this great crowd that are following Jesus and the disciples. They've left everything. It's a word...it's a very deliberate word. It's a word that occurs eight times in the New Testament, and in every single instance it refers in some way or another to Jesus. It's either on the lips of Jesus or it's about Jesus, as it is here. Jesus feels compassion for this crowd. It's a profound sense of pity that is evoked in the soul, in the heart—deep in the bowels, we might say—of the incarnate Lord, over these men and women because of their need.

What's it saying? There's a wonderful essay, it's one of the great essays written in the last hundred years: B. B. Warfield's, *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*. (If you're interested in pursuing that, go to the library and ask for the works of B. B. Warfield, and that will keep you for the rest of your life! But B.B. Warfield has this wonderful, wonderful little essay on *The Emotional Life of Our Lord*. And he has a comment about this particular aspect of Jesus' compassion. What's it saying? It's saying Jesus cares. He cares for this crowd. He cares for them. There's something that wells up within Him, that Mark says is compassion.

There's a hymn—it's far too sentimental a hymn for us to sing here at First Presbyterian Church, but you know, there's a time when the words of this hymn...there's a place where this hymn will probably speak to you in a very deep and profound way.

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained  
Too deeply for mirth and song;  
As the burdens press,  
And the cares distress, and the  
Way grows weary and long?  
Oh, yes! He cares! I know He cares!  
His heart is touched with my grief.

When the days are weary,  
The long nights dreary,  
I know My Savior cares.

Now, OK, it's sentimental. And it is sentimental. But you know, it's a very profound thought that is echoed by one of Jesus' own disciples who saw it, who saw it with his own eyes. "Cast all your cares upon Him," Peter says, "because He cares for you." He cares for you.

Maybe that's why you came to this prayer meeting tonight, because you find yourself in some measure of grief or distress. And maybe you're asking this very question: "Does He care? Does He care about my financial situation? Does He care about my family? Does He care about my children? Does He care about my health? Does He care about the things that keep me awake at night and distress me, and trouble me?" And here's Mark, and he's saying that something in the soul of Jesus wells up deep from within Him as He sees this crowd in all of its disarray and confusion, and it's compassion. It's compassion.

Now Mark goes on to explain that He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. And if you were one of the disciples hearing Jesus say that, you would immediately recognize that Mark is implying, or maybe these are the actual words of Jesus Himself, that this is an allusion to the Old Testament. It's in fact an allusion to many passages in the Old Testament, not least to passages in Ezekiel 34, where Ezekiel is describing the condition of Israel, and the condition of God's people who are without shepherds to lead them and guide them. I grew up on a farm, and we had sheep, you know—I was in Wales, and that's mainly what's in Wales. There are more sheep in Wales than there are people. And sheep without a shepherd are a very sad sight, because sheep wander anywhere. You leave a gate open, or in our cases, the hedgerows weren't kept as they should have been, and there were holes in them and the sheep would go out and wander. And you'd spend days looking for them, because they would just wander off.

And that was the state and condition of Israel in Ezekiel's day, and Jesus is alluding to that now. Here are the Lord's people, these are the men and women of Galilee. These are the Jews of the first century, and they're leaderless. Where are the teachers? Where are the priests of the temple? Where are the great preachers who expound to them the Torah, who expound to them the word of God, the Old Testament? And they're bereft! They're directionless, they're leaderless, and Jesus feels deeply about it, and they're asking questions. Half the time they're asking the wrong questions. Some of them, no doubt, were looking to Jesus and the disciples, and perhaps they were thinking that at last someone had come who would remove the bondage and tyranny of the Roman occupation: a Judas Maccabeus figure, Judas the Hammer, who would cast out these Seleucids, and, for a time at least, revive the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel; who would deal with the terrible atrocities that Antiochus

Epiphanes had done—his Gentile desecration of the temple—and maybe they were looking to Jesus now to be that kind of figure. And Jesus looks at them, and He sees them as sheep without a shepherd.

They'd remember how Moses had prayed in Numbers 27: "May the Lord appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd." That was Moses' prayer. And the very next verse says, "So the Lord said to Moses, 'Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him.'" Joshua—this is Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus. And the answer to Moses' prayer, do you see? is not Joshua, at the end of the day. The answer to Moses' prayer is Jesus. And this statement, this compassion because He sees them as sheep without a shepherd is actually a Messianic declaration. Jesus is proclaiming Himself to be the Messiah of God's people.

And you notice, do you notice what Jesus does? He has compassion on them, and He sees them as sheep without a shepherd. And do you know what He does in verse 35? Look at verse 35. Well, you need to look at the end of verse 34. He began to teach them many things. And verse 35 says, "And when it grew late...." Now, you're following what Mark is saying, that they're tired, they're hungry. They were hungry before they made this trek over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has compassion on them and sees them in all of their need. They're hungry! And what does He do? He preaches to them. He preaches to them, and Mark is having fun with you, because he's saying "...and when it grew late...." This was a ten-minute little homily! No. This was a Eutychus thing that went on and on and on, until it grew late! Isn't that extraordinary, that the main need as Jesus saw it was not their physical hunger. They'd get over a few hours of hunger. But there was something far, far more needy, and that was the need of their souls. And He teaches them. And He preaches to them, and He expounds to them the word of God.

Oh! I'd love to take that down a little road, but I'd be naughty. But I do want you to see it. It's an extraordinary little statement that Jesus, having compassion on them, then preaches to them. You know, the world would say that's the last thing people need, isn't it? That's the last thing people need, is more teaching and preaching. And Jesus says it's the fundamental thing that we need. It's the fundamental thing that we need.

## **II. Jesus' power.**

Secondly, I want us to see Jesus' power, because this miracle of feeding the five thousand... it actually says at the end 'five thousand *men*', and it uses the actual male term in Greek, which leads to the possible conclusion, it's a little bit speculative, but perhaps there were women and children in addition to the five thousand men, and so there are some who have conjectured that maybe there

were ten thousand, or maybe there were twelve thousand there. There were a lot of people there. There were a lot of people there.

And I want us to see what the disciples' response to this was. And do you notice what their response was? "Send them away...." (verse 36). You know, isn't that so indicative of how the church often responds to problems? I mean, here's a problem. I mean, this is a big problem: five thousand, maybe ten thousand people—it's late in the day now. You know, there isn't a McDonald's in Bethsaida, or a Chic-fil-A, or a McAllister's. You know, even late in the day... bread was usually baked at night and you bought it in the morning. So even as the disciples actually say, "Let's send them away to the villages to buy bread", where were they going to buy bread? For five thousand people? Late in the day? So do you see their response? Look. Here's a problem: send it away! Let's get rid of it!

But that's not the way Jesus deals with problems, is it? Praise God, that's not the way Jesus deals with problems. There's absolutely nothing here to meet their need, but they have overlooked the one crucial thing: that Jesus is there. Jesus the Son of God is there. Jesus the divine Messiah is there. Jesus the Creator of the heavens and the earth is there. Jesus, who is the bread of life, is there!

Man's extremity is God's opportunity, we sometimes say. Do you see what Jesus is doing when He sends them? He asks them a little question, verse 37. "He said to 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? "

Now, two hundred denarii worth is roughly the equivalent of eight months wages for your average worker. Now it would be interesting to work that out in dollars, but it's irrelevant, because the point is, whatever that number is, there is nobody...there is nobody in that crowd who carries that amount of money. Right? The disciples just didn't have that kind of money with them. Now, they obviously had some money with them, and Judas, you remember, was the carrier of the money bag. But they didn't have enough to buy bread for five thousand or ten thousand people.

Now do you see what Jesus is doing? Jesus is underlining their inability to meet the need in and of themselves. The only way, the only way this problem is going to be remedied is not by some intuitive work on their part. It's not by some clever initiative on their part. The only way this problem is going to be met is by a demonstration of the sovereign power of Jesus Christ. And remedy it He can, and remedy it He does.

Now they're asked to sit down. And Peter, who is Mark's eyewitness as Mark writes the gospel, sees clumps of people sitting in groups of fifty and a hundred, and he uses a Greek word for "groups" which is the Greek word for "flower beds." And do you notice the little detail that the grass was green? You know, that means it's springtime, because after May or so the grass, as often happens here

unless you have sprinklers, will turn brown, and as it did then. So this is springtime, and it looks at though these people are sitting like clumps of flowerbeds on a green park. Now what's that saying? It's saying this actually happened to us. You know, Peter is describing to Mark the little details of what actually happened. He's painting the picture for you. This isn't just a folklore, this isn't a story that someone made up.

And then this little boy has five loaves and two fish. Now, they're probably little tiny things. They're not—you know, great big sliced loaves from your grocer's. They're probably little tiny things. It's his lunch, that's all it was. It was a little boy's lunchbox. And from that, Jesus begins to distribute to the disciples, and the way Mark records it seems to indicate that the miracle was actually taking place as Jesus was handing it to the disciples. And Jesus does what every male head in a Jewish home would do at the time of a meal: He gives thanks to God, and He breaks the bread. And a miracle is taking place. It's a miracle of multiplication.

This isn't a miracle of sharing. You know, the liberals have been saying now for a hundred years that, you know, what actually happened here was that people had their food, but you know, they were hiding it like that Cheese-Its advertisement, and everybody stops and he looks because he's eating the Cheese-Its. You know the advertisement! This isn't a miracle of sharing! This is a miracle of multiplication! The word of God, the logos of God, the divine Creator incarnate is standing in their midst, and He's reproducing bread and fish to feed this five thousand. It's a sign of Jesus' identity! It's saying to them, "I am the bread of life."

### **III. Jesus' satisfaction.**

But there's a third thing I want us to see, and that is, I want us to see Jesus' satisfaction. Look at what Mark says in verse 42, because it's beautiful. "They were all satisfied." Isn't that a nice word? You know, they'd been eating bread and fish. But it's the word you'd use when you've had Thanksgiving dinner. You know, you've had turkey, the dressing, the gravy and the potatoes and whatever else you have, you know, and dessert. And you feel satisfied. You're not hungry anymore. You've been replenished. And isn't that what Jesus always does? Isn't the provision that Jesus gives always satisfying? Because you can taste of the cisterns of this world, but those cisterns are broken, and you will be hungry again. But when you feed from the provision that Jesus gives you, it satisfies as nothing else can do...which reminds me of those beautiful words of Augustine, that "my heart was restless until it found its rest in Thee."

And I think that's what Mark is trying to say to us here, that the Great Shepherd of the sheep who taught first of all, and preached first of all, and then provided for their physical well-being, satisfied them in a way that nothing else can do! So that when Mick Jagger said, "I find no satisfaction..."...he needs to look to Jesus in the profoundest possible sense. He needs to look to Jesus: Jesus the mighty Creator



is here. Jesus the promised Messiah is here. Jesus the bread of life is here.

And one little detail at the end. Twelve baskets of leftovers! You know, I feel a book coming on! Not *Left Behind*, but *Leftovers!* You know, there's a profound theology here: the theology of leftovers. There's a wonderful sense in which this tells us so much about the extravagance of Jesus' provision. Why are there leftovers? Well, because the disciples need to eat, and Jesus needs to eat, too.

#### **IV. Application**

What's this saying to us? It's saying to us that there are people in this world who live for bread alone, and they enter the twilight of their years and they're still living by bread alone. And one of the saddest things that you ever see is the physical form of an individual emaciating as old age takes its course, and they've lived for bread alone, and that bread ultimately does not satisfy. And only, only as you feed on Jesus the Bread of Life will you never die, but live forever in His eternal presence in those mansions of glory which He has now gone to prepare for all those who love Him. And may God enable us tonight to catch just a little glimpse of the glory of the One who trod the shore of the Sea of Galilee and fed these five thousand and satisfied them—and there were leftovers!

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we thank You for our Savior Jesus Christ, that He cares for us, cares for our deepest needs, and deepest fears and deepest longings, and that He satisfies. Lord Jesus, You satisfy us in ways that are unimaginable. Forgive us when we complain. Forgive us when we bemoan the providence that You send our way. You have filled us with good things. You have set our feet in a good place. You have surrounded us by the wealth of Your provision. Enable us now tonight to feed upon You and know that certainty of eternal life that comes by union with You, now and forever. Bless Your word to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

*Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.*

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