

Lesson 5

When Provision Overflows

Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. Matthew 14:19-20a

The green grass rippled in the cool breeze blowing off of the Sea of Galilee. The azure water reflected the vivid colors of the setting sun. But the disciples likely didn't notice. They were quietly organizing the mass of people into groups, just like Jesus asked. But why did He set them to such a task? They may have been wondering:

What is Jesus planning on doing with five loaves and two fish?

Is He simply going to have the crowd watch Him eat?

Does He really think that small fare will feed this multitude?

The disciples likely had dozens of questions running through their minds, but did you notice one vital aspect? *They obeyed Jesus.*

They may have questioned His method and suffered weak faith, but they still obeyed. And God did a miraculous work.

Do you sometimes have problems believing that God will come through? Do you have a difficult time in the faith department? Welcome to the crowd. When situations in our lives seem impossible and we question how God can possibly bring order to chaos, there is an important lesson here:

Obey God anyway.

Take a moment to write out Matthew 14:14:



In this fifth lesson, we are studying Matthew 14:19-20a, which states, *Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to*

heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied.

Green grass surrounds the Sea of Galilee after the late winter or early spring rains. So during this Passover time, there was plenty of grass for the people to sit on – even such a great multitude. Have you ever been in a crowd that large?

Although we cannot know what the people were thinking, we can relate to a certain extent. At one time or another, chances are you have been part of a large crowd. Whether at a sporting event or concert, we have witnessed people's behavior. They're protective of their space, their stuff, and their stomachs.

Now imagine the scene on that Galilean hillside. Throughout the course of the day, perhaps upwards of 20,000 people witnessed Jesus heal one sick person after another. Shouts of joy probably filled the air numerous times, along with cheering onlookers as lame beggars became walking storyboards of testimony.

They heard Jesus talk about a heavenly kingdom for all who believed by faith. A place where He is preparing mansions for them to live for all eternity (John 14:2).

Can you picture it?

Organizing the Multitude

Now imagine orchestrating order to a milling crowd of that size. Let's break it down so that we can wrap our minds around it.

How much space would 20,000 people occupy? Scripture does not tell us anyone in the crowd went home after they'd been healed or grew tired of watching the healing spectacle.

Today, Madison Square Garden in New York seats 18,200 for a hockey match, 19,763 for a basketball game, and 20,000 people for a concert.

But if you haven't been there, picture a standard football field. A football field is 360 feet by 160 feet. That equates to 57,600 square feet. If you allowed for an average of 3 x 2 feet for a person sitting down, this would allow a total of 9,600 people on a standard professional field.

So there are more than two football fields full of people jammed into this area.

That's a LOT of people. A LOT of hurt. And a LOT of noise.

In the midst of it all, Jesus orders the people to sit. The word for *order* in Matthew 14:19 is actually the word for *command* (Greek, *keleuō*). It is a stronger word than simply to make an announcement. This word denotes authority. Only those with a certain level of power or clout used that word with any effectiveness.

On two occasions in particular, this *command* word was used by rulers in the New Testament. Who was commanding and what are they ordering done in the following verses?

Matthew 14:9-11

Person giving command: _____

Command given: _____

Matthew 27:57-58

Person giving command: _____

Command given: _____

Herod ruled over Galilee. Pilate governed Jerusalem. But Jesus was and is sovereign over all.

How do you see the crowd react to Christ's authority in these verses?

Matthew 7:28-29 _____

Mark 1:21-28 _____

In the Gospels, disciples are often asked to do the little things in preparation for Jesus' big things. Here, He asks them to seat the people. How do you see that same preparation principle in the following verses?

John 11:38-39 _____

Mark 14:12-16 _____

Perhaps such verses desire to teach disciples that in addition to giving Jesus the honor of a little faith, He can also do with the service of a little setting up. He calls disciples through whom He can work so that His truth and love can enter through us into the lives of others. He simply asks that, through the working of the Holy Spirit, we come to Him as we are, however ill-equipped, so that He can use it greatly in His service.

Little is always much in the hands of Christ.

These verses also point to the fact that our God is a God of order. When Moses became exhausted when leading God's people, what advice did Moses' father-in-law provide in Exodus 18:21? _____

Just as in those Mosaic camps, gathering this multitude in groups brought order to chaos. This orderliness accomplished three specific things:

- (1) to facilitate the distribution of food;
- (2) to stabilize the people and keep them from getting into a panic and lunging for the food once they started to give it out; and
- (3) it was a way to count the people.

Have you ever been asked to organize a large group of people? If so, what did that orderliness accomplish?

When Jesus commanded that the multitude sit, we view it through our own culture of actually resting in a sitting position. Jewish people did not sit at meals, they reclined. We see this principle in the original language here. *Sitting* refers to *reclining* (Greek, *anakeimai*), or lying on the grass as though it were a table.

Since Jesus gave the order for the people to sit, we conclude that they were standing. This bears pointing out because Jewish culture denoted standing as a posture of reverence. Jesus taught as He moved among the crowd, so the people afforded Him the respect of standing. It also served as a sign of their confidence in Jesus.

Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus ordered the disciples to seat the people in groups of hundreds and fifties (Mark 6:40). The grouping here (Greek, *prasiai prasiai*) refers to garden bed by garden bed. What a beautiful, vivid picture! The people were clustered in groups of fifties and hundreds in their colorful garments with green grass aisles between them. From God's perspective, it would have looked like garden beds of flowers among the green grass!

John's Gospel tells us, *Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand* (John 6:4). The mention of the Passover marks the date of this miracle around the time of Nisan, but it does much more. John's narrative explains the action of this multitude when, after the miracle of the loaves, they conceived the plan of forcing Jesus to go with them to Jerusalem to be made a king. We will touch on this more in our next lesson.

Even with the beauty of this garden of people, we are struck with the simplicity of the banquet. It stands in striking contrast to Herod's birthday party when he ordered John the Baptist beheaded.

What does Matthew 14:6-7 state? _____

At Herod's banquet we notice there was dancing and guests to help him celebrate. Matthew 14:9 reveals that Herod's guests were dinner guests. Imagine the pomp and lavishness indulged in at Herod's birthday bash.

Have you ever attended a lavish party? If so, did you dress up?

Was the whole experience relaxing?

Here, Jesus simply and efficiently met the people's basic needs. Physical healing. Food. Fellowship. Nothing fancy needed.

What question does Psalm 78:19 ask? _____

On that spring day in Galilee, God in Christ did that very thing.

Blessing and Giving Thanks

After Jesus asks the Twelve to divide the people into workable groups, He says a prayer of blessing. (I cannot help but wonder if the disciples were peeking during the prayer to see where the delivery trucks were going to come from.)

In traditional Jewish families, from Biblical times to now, sharing meals is a very important part of Jewish family and community life. So important, that special blessings are said at the start and end of the meal.

In Matthew, this must have been the usual grace before a meal. If the words employed by Jesus had been unusual, one or more of the four evangelists would surely have at least intimated that fact. Jesus probably spoke a traditional Jewish blessing such as, "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

Do you give thanks or say grace before your meals?

We see numerous examples in Scripture that giving thanks to God for His provision is standard practice. How do you see that truth in these verses?

Acts 27:35 _____

1 Corinthians 11:24 _____

In the Jewish culture, looking up was typical posture for prayer. Looking up into the sky reflected a common practice in connection with prayer, both in the Old and New Testaments.

Write out these examples:

John 11:41 _____

John 17:1 _____

Psalms 123:1 _____

Matthew, Mark, and Luke record that Jesus *spoke a blessing*, which John defines as giving thanks. The object of Jesus' thanks is not stated, so it could refer to either the food or God. However, the fact that Jesus looked up to heaven indicates that the blessing was an act of praise to God the Provider rather than a consecration of food. Similar to our saying grace before a meal, this blessing thanked God for His bountiful provision.

In giving thanks and blessing, Jesus witnessed to the crowd and disciples that all gifts come from God. What do His actions say to us today?

Giving thanks for what we already have is the first step toward blessing.

Breaking Bread Together

Have you ever said, "Let's break bread together"? If so, what does that mean?

Among the Jews, the breaking of bread was done only in the context of a meal. In fact, the Talmud (Jewish Oral Law) uses the term only in reference to the blessing at the start of the meal. Today, the one who says the blessing over the bread is referred to as the one who “breaks bread.” This task was reserved for the head of the household.

The term *breaking bread* is mentioned several times in the New Testament. What stands out to you in the following verses about breaking bread?

Acts 2:42-47 _____

Acts 20:7 _____

Breaking bread served to gather people and communities to pause and enjoy fellowship with one another.

How often do you take time to do likewise?

How do you feel afterwards?

In New Testament times, the phrase *to break bread* was also used to describe the partaking of the Lord’s Supper. It is not accidental that when Jesus distributes the bread, we hear its echoes. The order in which Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and distributes the bread here matches His institution of the Lord’s Supper, which provides a glimpse of the grand feast to come.

Jesus instituted this special supper while celebrating the Passover with His disciples shortly before His death approximately one year after this miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Perhaps Matthew desired to show that a major way Jesus prepares to feed the world and fuel His church for feeding the world is the Lord’s Supper itself.

How does Paul address the subject of the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17? _____

Let's make no mistake. This feeding of the five thousand was a common meal, not Communion. In that Galilean countryside, Jesus broke bread to physically provide food for the hungry multitudes.

There is another spiritual lesson in the sequence when Jesus says a blessing over the bread and then breaks it.

There is a pattern in the blessing and breaking. Have you noticed in your life that right after the blessing stage comes the broken stage?

When God began opening doors for me to teach God's Word and write Bible studies, I experienced an incredible season of blessing. Speaking opportunities started knocking from outside of Texas and I could not have been happier in my marriage, home life, and work life.

Then the most painful break that I have ever experienced shattered my Utopia. My life turned upside down when I found out my husband was leading a secret, double life. Four months later, I was divorced. I had no children. And I was 42 years old. *CRASH.*

Have you ever experienced a season of brokenness after a season of blessing? Explain.

Because I love you, I want to offer you a word of caution: **Don't allow the broken seasons to make you cautious about enjoying the blessings of God.** By His grace, I have known God for 22 years and received many blessings in my life. But none of the knowledge I received of Him in the blessing stage even compares to what I learned about Him in the breaking stage.

God does not give to the world bread that has not been broken. We see that truth in the bread of the Last Supper. We see that truth in Jesus, the Bread of Life, broken on Calvary's cross.

We cannot fully live if we constantly wait for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Do not let the enemy steal your joy! Rejoice in your blessings, and yes, even your brokenness. Because our brokenness allows God's glorious light to shine through the cracks into a dark world.

The Multiplication Miracle

There were about 20,000 people. Twelve disciples. Five loaves. Two fish. And Jesus.

The people sat orderly. A hush fell over the green slopes. All eyes turned to Jesus. Do you wonder what was running through the disciples' minds?

What is Jesus going to do?

Are we just going to watch Him eat lunch?

Why did He order us to arrange the people for a meal when we don't have any food for them?

I just wonder what the disciples wondered.

The most striking aspect of this massive miracle is that it was performed completely void of fanfare. Jesus didn't put on a show by making a huge pile of fish and bread appear. In fact, we are not told that there was any visible difference.

Jesus simply took the five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, gave thanks, and began giving the food to the disciples to distribute.

Did you notice the significance of that order of events? Despite their lack of faith, regardless of their doubt, *Jesus still entrusted those provisions to the disciples to distribute.*

That might not strike you as important, but let me ask you something. If you were the boss and your employees showed such lack of initiative and motivation in the creative process, would you entrust them with the final product launch?

Jesus could have easily brushed the disciples aside as useless and distributed it Himself. He could have placed the disciples in time out until they could be nice. Instead He placed them in charge of distribution.

In the context of ministry, why is that such a crucial point to understand?

Would you have entrusted that task to the disciples? Why or why not?

That is the way ministry works. The Lord chooses to give so that we might give to others from His provision. When Jesus broke the loaves and returned them to the disciples for distribution, He confirmed the work of their hands on His behalf to serve:

Mark 16:20 _____

1 Corinthians 3:9 _____

2 Corinthians 6:1 _____

Even when we prove disappointing to God, God does not withdraw His affection or provision to those who willingly serve Him.

We notice that key point here, as well. The disciples had not completely given up and headed for the hills. They remained with Jesus with their hands out and willing to serve. Despite their doubts, they continued to be faithful to what Jesus asked them to do.

Have you ever experienced similar doubt?

What was the outcome, or is it still a work in progress?

Perhaps you experience doubting days, as well. What then? Continue to spend daily time in His Word, bend your knees in prayer, stay actively involved at church, and serve where He leads.

If Jesus would have acted according to the faith of the disciples, the multitudes would have gone hungry. But He didn't – and He doesn't today. Rather than punish the disciples, Jesus employs them. They end up serving as waiters at this miraculous meal.

Our faith may waiver, but God's faithfulness never does.

God dispenses His blessings according to the riches of His grace, not the depth of our faith. We see that truth in 2 Timothy 2:13. Write it here: _____

They passed out bread they did not request and enjoy the answer to the prayer they didn't even pray.

So the disciples functioned as waiters at this grand feast. Jesus gave and gave and gave, and as He gave there was always more to give. Luke and Mark record that Jesus *continued to give to the disciples*, which tells us that the miraculous multiplication of bread occurred in Jesus' hands – not their own.

Imagine the disciples' surprise when they served the first 50. Then the provisions kept coming for the second 50. The disciples received from Jesus and they gave to the hungry people. They did not generate the food, they simply distributed the provisions they were given.

Jesus did not hold back from giving. Had it been left up to Philip, the hungry crowd would have only received a miniscule portion from what two hundred denarius could purchase.

Jesus kept giving. He gave fish that had never lived and bread containing barley that had never been grown.

Over the centuries, some attempt to explain away this miracle by suggesting that Jesus and His disciples shared their lunch and the crowd followed their good example. But Matthew 14:20a states that the people *all ate and were satisfied*. Shared lunches and bits of fish do not equate with being fully satisfied.

God promises to feed the hungry. Write out these verses:

Luke 1:53 _____

Luke 6:21 _____

If you are hungry, Jesus will satisfy you. How do you see that truth in Psalm 23:1? _____

In Matthew, the word used to describe that the people were *satisfied* is a word used of fattening animals. The verb used (Greek, *ecortasqhsan*) is used of animals that are fed to capacity with grass. So what we behold is a great, gluttonous feast.

The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fish is not described—indeed, it is not even mentioned as such. Only after everyone had eaten to their satisfaction did they realize a miracle occurred.

There is something about sharing a meal together. Although the Gospels do not reflect one single conversation that took place among those in the crowd, we might take a moment to ponder. There's something that happens in the context of community from which we can learn a lesson.

Because of the geographic area, there were people present from many different towns. Perhaps some of them had never met. But in a gathering like this for that length of time, lots of conversations can take place. People find out what they have in common - a relative or line of work. They find out who's hurting, why, and perhaps how they might help. They talk about Jesus. Then they share a meal of camaraderie.

There's something special about community. How are you doing in yours?

Let's review our Bible memory verse for our study. Write out Matthew 14:14 once more:



Closing

When the disciples wanted to give up, Jesus asked them to seat the crowd.

When they handed Jesus the five loaves and two fish, they didn't have faith. But Jesus gave thanks.

For what? The weariness? The crowds? The sick? The chaos? No. He thanked God for a basket of bread and two small fish.

He ignored the doubt and focused on His Father.

We need to understand His perspective because we often see more mouths to feed than bread to go around. More wounds than physicians. More cynical Christians than missionaries afire.

You and I cannot simply give up and take a seat. As God's representatives, how can we possibly tell the world that we can't help?

We don't.

We look up and trust. We take His basket of provision to share it, giving thanks to our Provider, with hopeful optimism.

Close with prayer:

✝Father, so often when I believe I don't have all that I want, I have trouble looking to You and giving thanks. But You have promised to always provide exactly what I need. Thank you for teaching me once again the difference between need and want. And when I don't think it's enough, forgive my unbelief and remind me that my little is always enough in Your hands. In Jesus' name, Amen. ✝

Notes

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DVD Listening Guide

Lesson 5

Three reasons to organize the crowd:

- 1) facilitate _____
- 2) stabilize the _____
- 3) _____ the people

Giving _____ for what we already have is the first step toward _____.

God does not give to the world _____ that has not been _____.