

A PRIMER ON MINISTRY

John 6:1-13

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“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.” (Jn. 6:5-6).

In our last study, we looked on Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand as a picture of the salvation Jesus offers to all who come to him. Jesus is the new Moses, his salvation is a new exodus, and the bread he so miraculously provided was the new manna from heaven. It is important that we look on the events of Jesus’ ministry as they point to his work of leading his followers to heaven.

But it is equally important that we notice how Jesus responded to the needy world. Few Gospel accounts so vividly present the vast numbers of needy people in our world, as well as Jesus’ compassionate ministry on the hungry and poor. While we reject liberal interpretations that deny the miraculous in this account, seeing this only as Jesus’ moral persuasion in motivating people to share the food they already had, we must also not deny the truth that his miracle calls God’s people to generosity for a needy and hungry world.

Like Jesus, Christians must call on God’s power to do good in the world. With our access to the power of God in service and prayer, Christians should not shy away from the real needs of suffering people. In this way, Christians through the centuries have shown God’s mercy and commended God’s gospel to the world. It was Christians who founded the first hospitals, universities, relief agencies, and orphanages. Likewise, it is Christians today who must lead the way in difficult ministries of mercy, reaching out to the broken and lonely, taking in the orphaned children, and showing God’s grace to those left behind or endangered by societal neglect.

The reality is that Christians today are surrounded by a world in desperate need, just as Jesus was. How easy it would be for us to turn away from this seemingly insurmountable quantity of needs. On the world scale, how can our churches make a difference for the starvation of whole people groups, the millions of parentless children, or the AIDS epidemic in Africa? Even in our local communities, how can the proportionally few Christians handle the vast number of children in foster care, elderly and sick people who are lonely, or women contemplating abortions, not to mention the huge number of sinners needing to hear the gospel?

Jesus seems to have had such questions on his mind, because according to John, the purpose of this miracle was not merely to provide a day's meal to the large crowd. Jesus also wanted to make a point to his disciples, and through them to us. John writes, "Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, 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" (Jn. 6:5-6). In other words, Jesus was training for his disciples for their future ministry, and thus instructing us today as we are called to be Jesus' hands and hearts in the needy world.

The account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, then, provides a primer for Christian ministry. Through his own example, our Lord teaches the *motive* for Christian ministry, our *calling* in Christian ministry, God's *provision* in Christian ministry, and the bold *faith* we should exercise in ministry on Christ's behalf.

OUR MOTIVE IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

The first thing we see is the motive Jesus presents for Christian ministry. There is a great contrast here between Jesus and the disciples. All through his life Jesus was motivated by compassion. He saw the people scattered as sheep, so he shepherded them; he found them unknowing, so he taught them; he found them sick and hungry, so he healed and fed them. In striking contrast is the attitude of the disciples who urged Jesus simply to send them away.

The disciples' indifference comes across more clearly in the other Gospels. Luke tells us that the Twelve came to Jesus and said, "Send

the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place” (Lk. 9:12). This is an attitude that Christians often have toward the needy. “It’s their own fault that they came here without food,” some of the disciples might have said. “Shouldn’t they be responsible for themselves?” another might have commented. Jesus’ answer to them must have been just as shocking as it is to us today: “You give them something to eat” (Lk. 9:13).

We need to be discerning in this. Some churches have gotten so involved in social works that they have forgotten the world’s primary need to be reconciled with God, and thus have neglected our calling to spread the gospel. We often hear today of Christians “redeeming the culture” by building low-cost housing, getting involved in the arts, or feeding the poor. But none of these good works, important as they are, can reconcile sinners to God or redeem us from sin. The church’s primary calling is to advance Christ’s kingdom of salvation, and to this end we must preach the biblical message of salvation from sin.

But Jesus’ calling nonetheless challenges us all. How easy it is to lift our faces out towards the masses of spiritually and physically hungry people, to turn away and say, “Lord, send them somewhere else.” But to us, our Lord Jesus says exactly what he said to the Twelve, “You feed them.” Charles Spurgeon reflected:

Behold before you, disciples of Christ, this very day, thousands of men, and women, and children, who are hungering for the bread of life. They hunger till they faint. They spend their money for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfieth not. They fall down famished in your highways, perishing for lack of knowledge... See ye, disciples of Christ, see ye the great need which is before your eyes... Let the vision rise perpetually before your eyes. See your work. Great as it is, dispirited as you may be by the great multitude who crave your help, yet recognize the appeal to your faith. Let the magnitude of the mission drive you the more earnestly to the work instead of deterring you from it.¹

The disciples were like us. Focused on themselves, they tended to be indifferent to the plight of others. Faced with so great a problem they wanted to turn away rather than do what they could. To both them

¹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Miracles and Parables of Our Lord*, vol. 2, pp. 558-559.

and us, Jesus speaks out of his own great compassion: “You give them something to eat.” This is the motive for sacrificial, visionary Christian ministries: the compassion of Christ himself working through our hearts and hands. Moreover, it is probable that Jesus did not want the crowd to go seek their own food because he wanted them to stay and receive his teaching. Likewise, it must be our desire that through our acts of mercy and kindness, people would come to Jesus and be saved.

It is because of Jesus’ compassion that any of us can be saved. Just before entering Jerusalem to face the cross, Jesus heard a blind man calling, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” If there was ever a time when we might understand Jesus ignoring a needy soul it was now. Yet, however absorbed with the great ordeal facing him, Jesus did not turn away. The Bible says that “Jesus stopped,” just as he will stop to hear your call today. In great compassion, he asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” The man replied, “Lord, let me recover my sight,” and Jesus did just that (Lk. 18:35-42). If you call upon Jesus, he will have compassion on you. He will enable you to see the truth; he will cleanse you from your sins; he will renew your heart with life from God. All you need to do is call on him in faith. And then, remembering his compassion for you, he calls you to minister with his compassion for others.

OUR CALLING IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Next we see our calling in Christian ministry. This miracle took place around Bethsaida (Lk. 9:10), which was the hometown of several of the disciples – Philip, Andrew and Simon Peter. So they knew something about the resources nearby, and immediately despaired of coming up with food for so great a throng. Even if food was available it would be far beyond the means of this little band. Philip exclaimed, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little” (Jn. 6:7). Because of the magnitude of the problem they despaired of a solution, considering it not merely difficult but impossible.

Here is where Andrew brought the little boy who holds such a special place in the record of Scripture. John 6:8-9 tells of his brief and wonderful appearance: “One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s

brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?’” The boy did not have much, but he did the right thing, which is offer it to Jesus. “How far can this go?” the disciple asked. That is the kind of unbelief that often stalls our ministries, and Jesus would show them how much he can do with even the little we give to him.

Here is our calling in Christian ministry. We take what we have and bring it to Jesus Christ. Are our resources far too small to feed the hungry world with the gospel, much less our own community? Certainly they are, but that is no reason for us to despair, or to withhold whatever it is that we have. Instead we must bring what we have to Jesus Christ, asking him to give the blessing and meet our need.

This raises the question, “How much of what you have should you bring to the Lord?” The answer is everything you have, which really is not very much. All that you are and have – your money, time, talents, and experiences – consecrate your meager resources to the Lord and he will distribute them in abundance to the hungry world. The best investment you can ever make is what this little boy did: Offer what you have to Jesus, and he will spread blessing to many.

John says that when Jesus received the small amount of food, he immediately said, “Have the people sit down” (Jn. 6:10). There were five thousand men, and with women and children the number must have approached twenty thousand. What a wonderful statement this makes! As soon as we give what God has entrusted to our care, Jesus immediately begins to work. This shows that it is our failure to bring things to Jesus that stands in the way of ministry, not Jesus’ willingness to act with what we put into his hands. Arthur Pink says, “He did not scorn the loaves because they were few in number, nor the fish because they were ‘small.’ How this tells us that God is pleased to use small and weak things!... Dear [Christian], perhaps He is ready to use you – weak, insignificant, and ignorant though you be... But mark it carefully, it was only as these loaves and fishes were placed in the *hands of Christ* that they were made efficient and sufficient!”²

² Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 296-297.

OUR PROVISION IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Next, Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. Luke expresses this more dramatically: “Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves” (Lk. 9:16). The Greek word for “broke” is the same word used during the Last Supper, when Jesus “broke” the bread as a symbol of his death on the cross. Jesus is God’s provision of salvation for the world; “I am the bread of life,” he said (Jn. 6:35). It is because the Savior was broken to pay for our sins that there is hope for the world.

John says, “Jesus gave thanks” (Jn. 6:11). Luke says, “He looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them.” Notice the contrast between Jesus and the disciples. Where had the disciples been looking; where had they cast their eyes? They looked to their pockets, to the nearby town, to their own resources, assessing their own power to meet the problem. This is why they were discouraged. In great contrast we read that Jesus lifted his eyes to heaven. This reminds us that we should measure what is possible not according to our power, but God’s power, and that by looking to him we will find encouragement to meet the greatest needs.

One man who exemplified this principle was George Muller. While pastoring a church in Bristol, England, God laid on his heart the need for a Christian orphanage. At the time, Muller had only two shillings (fifty cents) to his name. Seeing that great need in 19th century England, but having no way to meet it, Muller began committing the matter to God in prayer. He prayed for months, until money was received to rent a house for thirty children. That itself would have been a significant ministry, but Muller kept praying. Before long he had three more houses, ministering to 120 orphans. So it went for ten years, Muller seeing the need, lacking the means, praying to God, and receiving heavenly provision. Often his work seemed about to fail, but Muller prayed. As he did, his ambitions for ministry grew larger. He prayed for 15,000 pounds to provide a house for 300 children, and in 1849 it opened. He prayed for another, and in 1858 he opened his second and third large orphan homes. By 1870, Muller was sheltering, feeding, and ministering to the souls of 2100 orphan

children. Through God's marvelous provision, sought by prayer alone, Muller never failed to feed his children a single day.

George Muller spent hours each day in prayer, and he brought specific requests to the Lord. And he prayed for God's help to continue a life of fervent prayer. A typical entry in his prayer journal reads:

I desire to be allowed to provide scriptural instruction for a thousand orphans, instead of doing so for 300. I desire to expound the Holy Scriptures regularly to a thousand orphans, instead of doing so to 300. I desire that it may be yet more abundantly manifest that God is still the Hearer and Answerer of prayer, and that He is the living God now as He ever was and ever will be, when He shall simply, in answer to prayer, have condescended to provide me with a house for 700 orphans and with means to support them... By the help of God I shall continue further day by day to wait upon Him in prayer, concerning this thing, till He shall bid me act.³

Not many Christians will have the kind of ministry God gave to George Muller. But there is no reason for us not to do great things for God. When I was recently in Uganda, I met a pastor who was returning from Lira, near the Uganda-Sudan border. This is one of the most violent regions in the world, where a fanatical terrorist army targets children in great numbers for murder, kidnap, and mutilation. This pastor had gone into that area with a group of Christians, without military escort, to set up orphanages for the refugee children. How could a group of Christians from California accomplish so great a ministry? Through the compassion of Christ and with the power of God.

Surely, the greatest cause of our lack of God's provision is the reason given by James 4:2, "You do not have, because you do not ask." This is why all who have accomplished much for God have been strong in prayer. They realized their weakness and the poverty of their means, but they looked to God's power for blessing. They spoke the words of Ps. 20:7, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God."

³ Cited from Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

OUR BOLDNESS IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

If we are to follow Jesus' instruction for our ministry, we must have compassion on the needy, bring what we have to the Lord, and seek God's power through prayer. Finally, we must do what Jesus had the disciples do, namely, to act boldly in faith. John says:

Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. (Jn. 6:11-13)

This is Jesus' model for us. Looking on the hungry world with the compassionate eyes of Christ, presenting all the little we have to him, turning our hearts to God to bless and empower the work, we must then act in faith, believing that God will do his work with the same power that fed the five thousand. How often those who do great things for Christ began with no idea of the scale of their success, but acted in faith because they believed in the power of God to bless. Jesus fed the five thousand with an abundance left over, demonstrating the power of his grace to feed the hungry world.

Let me apply this briefly, and for a change of pace I will begin with myself. What is the motive for a true gospel minister? Is it desire for praise and honor? Is it the joy of long hours pondering Scripture and learned books? Is it the need to tell people what you think about everything? The only true motive for a preacher of the gospel is the one set forth here – the compassion of Christ for a dying world.

What is a minister's calling? Surely a preacher must study and read, but that amounts to nothing unless the labor is placed into Jesus' hands. This means that the first concern of a preacher is never clever thoughts or catchy sayings. A preacher must be a diligent workman, offering his best to the Lord. But his first concern must be faithfulness to Jesus, to whom his preaching is first presented. This also means that a true ministry need not rely on manipulative devices, or descend to cheap marketing, and does not pander to the audience, but feeds the hungry with the bread of God's Word.

Where, then, does the power for preaching come from? To where should the preacher look? To his personality and dynamism? To a certain fool-proof formula? No, the power to move wills and change hearts comes only from God. A preacher must therefore look to heaven for blessing, and that will mean fervent and frequent prayer.

Finally, a gospel minister must act in faith, preaching not with self-confidence but with holy boldness. If I expect results I must preach by faith, not with timidity or fear but with the confidence that comes from faith in God to bless his Word, genuinely expecting him to convert the lost and edify the saints by the foolishness of preaching.

This is how you can pray or me and the other ministers of this church, that this would be the model of our ministry, a ministry of faith that is multiplied by the power of God.

Now let me apply this to you. What motive will cause you to minister to those around you at work, in your families, in your neighborhoods, and around the world? It can only be the love of God in Jesus Christ. Should you not be burdened with compassion for the worldly and spiritual needs of those around you? But you have so little. Your witness is awkward and shy. You do not have the buttons to push to persuade those bound by chains of darkness. But God does, so you must pray, and then act with boldness.

What is true for your witness is true for other ministries. If Jesus looked with compassion on the needy world, and if he commanded his disciples, "You feed them," then every Christian ought to be involved in at least some ministry. Jesus' lament, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Mt. 9:37), is still true today. Our shortage is not in ministries that can be started or advanced, but in Christians who are committed to serve in Christ's name.

But you have so little money or time or ability. Then take what you have, what you can do, and put it all in Jesus' hands. Then pray to God, looking to him for blessing, returning refreshed and bold in your labor because you trust in him. This is the way of Christian ministry, the primer that our Lord set before his disciples in the feeding of this great multitude. Why should we not be bold in offering our lives for great things, when Jesus has pointed the way to us, and when other

Christians have proved the power of God to bless even the weakest Christian who commits himself to ministry in the power of God?