



Matthew 15:32–39

32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.” 33 His disciples answered, “Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?” 34 “How many loaves do you have?” Jesus

asked. “Seven,” they replied, “and a few small fish.” 35 He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. 37 They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 38 The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. 39 After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

Reflection

I once heard a great preacher describe the temptation of viewing an overly familiar passage of the bible in the same way that we might view a squeezed lemon. It's so familiar, we've thoroughly drained it of its meaning, there's nothing new to see here, it's served its purpose, we can discard it, move on, and flick past it to something new. A familiar passage of the bible like a squeezed lemon. This may be our temptation today as we look at Jesus feeding the four thousand in Matthew chapter 15. After all, didn't he just feed the five thousand in Matthew 14? Not only is this a repeat, it's also a smaller miracle.

But the gospels of Jesus Christ do not waste a single word. In fact, and especially because they do not waste a single word, when something is repeated, with

such little space in between, it is done so with the strongest of emphasis. So by including this story barely a chapter after the first one, Matthew is making his point almost as loudly as he can. But what is his point? Let's take a look.

It's been three days that Jesus has been on the mountain, in a scene reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount and the miraculous healings that followed it in Matthew chapters 5–9. Only here in Matthew chapter 15, Jesus is doing similar things in Gentile lands. And whatever he was doing it must have been extraordinary. You see, many people in those times lived hand to mouth, they'd earn that evening's meal by the work they did on that day, and yet these people have been with Jesus for three days straight.

Jesus' healings after his Sermon on the Mount ended with him expressing compassion towards the Jewish people who were like sheep without a shepherd. He has compassion on these Gentile crowds too, who've been with him for three straight days, and have run out of food. As always, Jesus is concerned for both the spiritual needs and the physical needs of those who follow him. He's worried that they might collapse on the way home. Perhaps, as ever, Jesus is thinking particularly of the elderly, the children, the widows and the poor.

Again today we get a sense that his disciples should have been more switched on. Jesus has just fed a crowd of five thousand, here's a crowd of four thousand,

you'd think they would put have put two and two together, but apparently not. Jesus will pull them up on this later. But for now he repeats his miracle, this time feeding four thousand, and again Matthew only counts the men, which means including women and children this number is likely much higher. But why does Jesus repeat an almost identical miracle, and why does Matthew record it so closely to the one before?

The last seven words of yesterday's passage were 'And they praised the God of Israel'. These seven words are replaced no less significantly in today's passage with the seven loaves of bread. Yesterday, we saw a reaction from the Gentile crowds the likes of which we never see from the Jewish crowds. They praised the

God of Israel. And in today's passage we see Jesus repeating his feeding of the five thousand, which you'll remember spoke volumes, when you remember God feeding the Israelites in the desert with manna (bread) from heaven, before leading them to conquer the Promised Land. And so what is happening in today's passage is Matthew vividly illustrating the extension of Jesus' messianic ministry to the Gentiles. By feeding them in this same way he's extending God's sovereign provision to them, he's opening up the kingdom of God to them, including them in the new Israel that he will lead into the heavenly Promised Land and that will consist of both Jew and Gentile, people from every tribe and nation on earth.

Those crumbs that were so precious-

ly gathered by the Canaanite woman in great faith, those crumbs of bread that fell from her Master's table have now been graciously extended in the seven loaves of bread to these huge Gentile crowds. They've been praising the God of Israel through the ministry of Jesus. And now Jesus, the bread of life, breaks loaf after loaf, multiplying his provision again and again, ensuring that these vast crowds don't hungry. One day soon, in a similar manner, his body will be broken for them, ensuring that vast numbers of gentiles from every nation on earth – you and I included in their number – will never hunger again. By his grace and compassion, and our faith in his work over those three dark Easter days, we'll never collapse on the way, not even in death, but go on to praise the God of Israel forever in the eter-

nal Promised Land of heaven.

Last time there were twelve baskets left over, most likely representing the twelve tribes of Israel, one each in the hands of the twelve disciples. This time it's seven, the number very often represented in the bible as God's number. The new Israel, the whole people of God, includes both Jew and Gentile, people from every nation on earth. That's the trumpet blast of this entire extraordinary chapter in the middle of this the most Jewish of gospels. In many ways it's a turning point; rejected by Israel and her leaders, the gospel of Jesus Christ finds extraordinary faith amongst the Gentiles. But equally, in many ways this is the whole point of Matthew's gospel, which sees in the ministry of Jesus, the inauguration of the kingdom of God through which

is fulfilled God's foundational promises to the Israelite nation that they would be a light to the Gentiles and that all the nations on earth would be blessed through them.

Think & Pray

Please take some time now to reflect and pray over what you've been struck by in Matthew chapter 15. There's so much in this chapter I almost don't know where to start. You could praise God as you consider his faithfulness to his promises, how since the Fall and despite the unfaithfulness of his people at almost every turn, he has worked right throughout all of human history to call people from every tribe and nation back to himself. You might think deeply over that fact that faith

is often found in the most unlikely of places. Who is it in your life that you secretly think could never come to faith? Pray for them. Or perhaps it's a whole people group you're ready to give up on? Pray for them. Look at this Canaanite woman and her great faith, these Gentile crowds with little to no background whatsoever in Judaism; they're worshipping Jesus. It's like John Newton, the converted slave trader, said on one occasion, 'I have never despaired of any man since God saved me.'

Or you might simply rest for moment in the compassion of Jesus. See him there healing these vast crowds for three straight days, caring and loving those who traditionally have been the enemies of God's people, not able even to let them go home without miraculously putting some warm

food in their stomachs and strengthening their faith as his parting gift. Are you in trouble or hurting or hungry or sick? Are you from a nationality that is traditionally hostile towards Christianity? Come to Jesus, look at what he did for these people, will he do any less for you?