

Chapter 57: Compassion for our Needs

Matthew 14:13–21

After the death of John the Baptist, Jesus withdraws to grieve his friend and to rest in Matthew 14:13–21. When Jesus' plans are disrupted by a needy crowd, we encounter a genuine question: how will Jesus respond to the needs of others when he is mourning the death of his friend and partner in ministry? Here, we see the extraordinary, boundless compassion of Jesus that not only rises to meet the immediately presenting needs of those who pursue him, but that proactively plans out how to care for the needs of his disciples who labor alongside him. Through this story, we see the far ranges of an important biblical principle: *Jesus has compassion for our needs.*

The Needs of Jesus (Matt. 14:13)

As we settle into the story of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, the context from the previous story is important. Matthew tells us that "when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself" (v. 13a). Specifically, Jesus "heard" that Herod had beheaded John the Baptist by a report brought to him from John's disciples (Matt. 14:12). Jesus held John the Baptist in high honor (Matt. 11:7–19), so Jesus' withdrawal must be understood in part as Jesus' own grieving for the death of such a righteous and faithful man. If Jesus wept at the grave of a friend whom he was about to raise from the dead (John 11:35), our Lord must have felt all the more grief over the death of a man whom he would not raise at this time, especially given the wicked circumstances that led to John's death at the hands of Herod. Here, Jesus provides another example for us of the rightness and goodness of mourning and grief after the death of loved ones. Death is a horrible byproduct of the entrance of sin into the world, and we are right to abhor it until Jesus will finally put that last enemy under his feet (1 Cor. 15:25–26).

Still, Jesus' withdrawal also signifies more than this. In the Gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus withdrawing at key transitional moments in his ministry (Matt. 4:12; 12:15; 14:13; 15:21). Even before Jesus' public ministry, this word for "withdraw" appeared to describe the movements of the wise men, Joseph, and Mary to escape the wrath of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:12, 13, 14, 22). Lenski, in making this observation, writes, "John's murder thus marks a new turn for Jesus. He begins his withdrawal. While he still meets multitudes and heals the sick, etc., we no longer see him seeking publicity; he often moves to distant parts and gradually prepares the Twelve for the end."¹ The day will eventually come when Jesus must go to the cross and die, but before that time, Jesus is consistently withdrawing as a strategic part of fulfilling his mission in the right way at the right time. So, if Jesus withdraws partially to care for his own human needs of grief for his friends, he also withdraws for the sake of the mission of preparing himself and his disciples for his death, resurrection, and departure from this world.

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 562.

The Needs of the Crowd (Matt. 14:14–16)

Jesus' respite from ministry does not last long, however. The "crowds" hear of where Jesus has gone, and they follow him on foot in droves (v. 13b). When Jesus encounters a "great crowd" who had followed him (v. 14a), there is a real question of how he will proceed. Will he demand more time to care for his own needs or the needs of his disciples? Instead, we read that Jesus "had compassion on them and healed their sick" (v. 14b). When Jesus "saw" a great crowd, the response arising in his heart was compassion for them. He came not to be served, but to serve. Again, Jesus sets an example: while he needs rest, his rest is not self-indulgent. Rather, the orientation of Jesus' life drives him to care for those whom he has come into the world to save.

Matthew emphasizes the fullness of Jesus' day of healing in two ways: first, by noting that "it was evening," and second by the disciples' comment that "the day is now over" (v. 15). While Jesus had gone away into "a desolate place" to grieve John's death, he ended up spending the entire day in personal ministry healing the sick who had flocked to him. By this hour of the day, the crowds were developing another need: to eat. Jesus could heal the sicknesses of the people, but that did not relieve them of all needs. God made human beings to need food to survive, even when we are healthy and free of disease. So now, in the time that Jesus devoted to healing one set of needs, another need has arisen for everyone present that day—not an acute need (sickness), but a chronic need (hunger).

This time, Matthew does not tell us that Jesus saw the growing need of hunger within the crowd. Rather, the disciples report the problem to Jesus and offer to him a suggested course of actions; "send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (v. 15). Their plan was logical to some degree; however, they did not think very highly of their Lord's ability to feed the crowds miraculously, and, even if Jesus had sent away the crowds, it is nearly impossible that the crowds of 5,000 men could have all secured sufficient food in the surrounding villages at the end of the day. The disciples underestimated Jesus' ability and overestimated their own plans.

While it is the disciples who report this problem to Jesus, v. 16 suggests that Jesus had already been aware of the problem. He does not seem caught off guard or panicked. Instead, he gives his instructions simple, yet impossible, instructions: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." In this sentence, the word "you" is emphatic.² It is as if Jesus is saying, "It is not my intention for the needs of these crowds to be filled by others. I want *you* to meet their needs." Notice, then, that Jesus first sought to meet his own needs by withdrawing, and then he had compassion to begin to meet the needs of the crowds personally. Now, it is no longer Jesus who directly meets the needs of the crowds, but Jesus insists that his disciples must play a part in meeting those needs of the crowd.

It is also significant that Jesus turns his attention from his spiritual labors of preaching, teaching, and healing in order to wait tables: "Hitherto Christ had bestowed his whole attention on feeding souls, but now he includes within his duties as a shepherd the care even of their bodies."³ While our Lord models this full scope of ministry on his own, the rest of the New Testament will demonstrate that the ministry of the word and the ministry of deed and mercy ought to be divided between different officers who are gifted to take up these distinct roles (Acts 6:2–4). This is an important point, since it reminds us that "Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, King, Saviour, and Head

² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 418.

³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:233.

of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures.”⁴ Jesus is the chief Elder and the chief Deacon within his Church.

The Needs of the Disciples (Matt. 14:17–21)

While Jesus instructs his disciples to perform this ministry, they object that they are not equipped to do so: “They said to him, ‘We have only five loaves here and two fish’” (v. 17). How, then, shall the disciples meet the great needs of this hungry crowd with so little food? In response, Jesus instructs the disciples to bring that meager portion of food to him (v. 18). Jesus intends for his disciples to meet the needs of the crowd, but they will not succeed in their mission apart from his work. After instructing the crowds to recline on the grass, Jesus took the food, “looked up to heaven and said a blessing” (v. 19a). John Calvin observes that Jesus’ example to “raise the eyes upwards is an excitement well fitted to arouse us from sloth, when our minds are too strongly fixed on the earth.”⁵ In other words, Jesus intends to meet the earthly, bodily needs of the people; however, he does not want to give the wrong impression as though this were an end in itself.

As many commentators note, Matthew describes this scene with the same language as we will discover in the passage where Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper: “taking...blessing...broke...gave” (v. 19; cp. Matt. 26:26).⁶ This is an important observation; however, we must be careful in how we interpret it. Matthew does not suggest that this meal *is* the Lord’s Supper, especially since the meal of bread and fish does not precisely match the meal of bread and wine prescribed in the Lord’s Supper. The point, then, is not that *this* meal is the Lord’s Supper, but that both this meal *and* the Lord’s Supper point forward to the messianic banquet that Jesus came to prepare: “The feeding of the crowd is therefore presented as a ‘foretaste’ of the central act of worship of the emergent Christian community, even though the menu was not quite the same. And since the Last Supper was itself a foretaste of the messianic banquet (26:29), that dimension, too, can legitimately be discerned in this story.”⁷

As the people ate, they were stuffed. While the ESV translates the word in v. 20a as “satisfied,” Lenski notes that the “verb is really coarse, it is borrowed from animals who are fed to capacity for fattening by using grass (χόρτος [*chortos*]) or fodder.”⁸ Moreover, there was so much food that the disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of the leftover pieces (v. 20b). The emphasis here is on the fullness of this feeding, especially in relation to the tribes of Israel who are symbolized by the twelve baskets (see Matt. 16:9–10).⁹ Jesus’ total fulfillment as the long-awaited Messiah may not match Israelite expectations, but he will satisfy them with overflowing abundance. More than how Moses had fed the Israelites bread in the wilderness (Ex. 16:15), more than how Elijah had ensured that the widow would never lack enough to eat (1 Kgs. 17:16), and more than Elisha had fed a hundred men

⁴ *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, “Preface to the Book of Church Order,” I.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:235.

⁶ e.g., Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 379.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 558–59.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 567.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 418.

with twenty loaves of barley bread (2 Kgs. 4:43–44), Jesus here feeds five thousand men with only five loaves and two fish.¹⁰

In part, this is a reminder that Jesus is ultimately the source of every meal that we eat—and, therefore, a prompting toward gratitude for his provision.¹¹ More than that, however, this is also a powerful demonstration of the messianic satisfaction that Jesus will accomplish. While he here feeds 5,000 men (in addition to an unspecified number of women and children), Jesus will one day bring many sons (and daughters) to glory (Heb. 2:10).¹²

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Jesus withdraw (v. 13)? How does this withdrawal compare with other scenes in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus or others around Jesus withdraw from danger? Why is this withdrawal necessary for Jesus in the short term, as Jesus grieves the death of John the Baptist? Why is this withdrawal necessary as Jesus awaits the fullness of time for him to go to the cross? What do we learn about caring for our own needs from Jesus' example here?
2. How does Matthew characterize the eagerness of the crowds as they follow Jesus (v. 13)? How does Matthew characterize their neediness (v. 14)? How might you or I respond if we had been confronted with the burdensome needs of the crowds in the middle of our grief? How does Jesus respond (v. 14)? How long does Jesus spend addressing the acute needs of the crowds (v. 15)? What do we learn about caring for the needs of others from Jesus' example here?
3. What other need do the disciples recognize that the crowd has acquired after a full day of Jesus' healing (v. 15)? What solution do the disciples offer (v. 15)? How valuable is this particular solution? What does Jesus instruct the disciples to do instead (v. 16)? How do the disciples respond to Jesus' instructions? In this, what kind of need has Jesus created for his disciples in the course of their ministry? How does Jesus help them to meet the needs of the crowd?
4. What does this passage teach us about Jesus' gracious provision to meet our daily needs? What does this passage teach us about Jesus' gracious provision to meet our eternal needs? What do the twelve baskets symbolize about the scope of the beneficiaries of the messianic banquet that Jesus came to prepare? What earthly need do you need to bring to Jesus right now? What spiritual need do you need to bring to Jesus right now?

¹⁰ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 597.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:235–36.

¹² On the counting, Hendriksen writes the following: “It is probable that the reason—at least one of the reasons—why the men alone were counted was that they constituted the overwhelming majority. One can hardly imagine that many women to whom the care of the little ones was entrusted would have walked all the way from Capernaum and surroundings to the northeastern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Some of this terrain is marshy and difficult. Not counting women and children, no less than five thousand had been miraculously fed. Because the people had been arranged in groups of fifty and one hundred the tally must have been easy.” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 596–97.)