

Chapter 62: Crumbs to Feed Four Thousand

Matthew 15:29–39

After Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–28, readers are left with a lot of questions. Was Jesus' care for this Gentile woman a one-time event, or did it signal a larger shift in redemptive history? On what basis did Jesus heal this woman's daughter—merely as something to do, or as an act that fit into a the deeper logic of God's covenant mercies? In this next section, Jesus demonstrates that his healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter was not a fluke. On the contrary, Jesus shows us here that *the Son of David will fully bless the nations*.

Care for the Canaanites (Matt. 15:29–31)

After his interaction with the Canaanite woman, Matthew tells us that “Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee” (v. 29a). While Matthew is not specific, the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark following Jesus' interaction with the Syrophoenician woman clarifies that Jesus “returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis” (Mark 7:31). So, while Matthew does not tell us explicitly, Mark's parallel helps us to recognize that Jesus is continuing this ministry among the Gentiles.¹

This is an important point for a number of reasons. First, Jesus seems to be repeating here among the Gentiles the ministry he has already accomplished among the Jews. To begin, we read that Jesus “went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him...” (vv. 29b–30a), which is reminiscent of the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount: “Seeing the crowds he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him” (Matt. 5:1).² So, when we read about all the people whom Jesus healed in vv. 30b–31, there is perhaps an allusion to the passage that came directly before the Sermon on the Mount: “So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them” (Matt. 4:24). Or, as an introduction to the feeding of the four thousand (vv. 32–39), this may allude to the healings that preceded the feeding of the five thousand: “When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matt. 14:14). As France puts it, “It seems therefore that the whole of 15:21–38 is presented as Jesus' ministry outside Israel, with the many healings and the feeding miracle deliberately balancing those already granted to the Jewish crowds, a point which is reinforced when it is noted that the healings in v. 31 parallel those performed in a Jewish context according to 11:5.”³

Second, this whole passage subtly develops the theme of Jesus' dominion over the Gentiles,

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 407.

² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 445.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 597.

building off of the confession of the Canaanite woman, who acknowledged Jesus as “Lord, Son of David” (Matt. 15:22). So, Osborne sees the description of how the crowds “put” the sick “at his feet” as a statement of their “humble submission” before Jesus.⁴ We will pick up this theme again when we turn to the feeding of the four thousand.

Third, this concept helps to understand the nature of the phrase, “And they glorified the God of Israel” (v. 31b). While many have noted that the phrase, “the God of Israel,” is entirely appropriate for praise coming from Israelites (e.g., Hagner points to Pss. 41:13, 72:18; 106:48; 1 Kgs. 1:48; Luke 1:68; Acts 13:17).⁵ Nevertheless, as France notes, this term “is never said about the Galilean crowds, and the terminology suggests that the crowd are Gentiles, recognizing the special power of the Jewish Messiah.”⁶ Thus, we are likely meant to understand this as a description of Gentiles who “ascribed honor to the God who originally was not theirs but the God of another people.”⁷

So, on the one hand, we have yet another summary passage of Jesus’ miraculous healings. On the other hand, this summary passage is advancing the narrative of Jesus’ conquest into Gentile territory that began in the previous passage with his encounter with the Canaanite woman. Immediately upon Jesus’ entry into Gentile territory, the praise of the God of Israel is spreading among the nations.

Compassion for the Canaanites (Matt. 15:32–33)

When Jesus previously fed the five thousand Jews, the people became hungry after only a single day (albeit a long one) of Jesus’ ministry in their midst: “Now when it was evening...” (Matt. 14:15). Here, however, the Gentiles remained among Jesus for three days, so that they had eaten almost all of the food that the crowds had brought along with them for the encounter.⁸ In the story leading up to the feeding of the five thousand, Matthew told us that Jesus had “compassion” (ἐσπλαγγίσθη; *esplanchnisthē*) on the crowds in order to heal them (Matt. 14:14). Now, Jesus has “compassion” (σπλαγγίζομαι; *splanchnizomai*) on the crowds because of their hunger. Also, it had previously been the disciples who had raised the issue of the hunger of the crowds, but now Jesus seems to have “anticipated and answered” the issue before the disciples can raise it.⁹ Once again, Jesus tells the disciples that he has no intention of sending them away.

Then again, as before, the disciples raised the question of where they might find enough food to feed the crowd (v. 33). Now, some point to this question as evidence that this story of Jesus’ feeding of the four thousand must be a re-telling of the story of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand.¹⁰ Still, it is

⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 601.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 446. Although I do not know what precisely to make of it, it is interesting to note that the three psalms that use this expression come at the conclusions to Book 1, Book 2, and Book 4 of the Psalms. See also Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 640–41.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 597.

⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 627.

⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 629.

⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 450.

¹⁰ e.g., Hagner writes, “...we have here variant versions describing what was originally but one event. What inclines one to this conclusion more than anything else is the extreme improbability that after experiencing the feeding of five thousand and now being confronted with an almost identical situation with

simply not the case that this is “an almost identical situation.” There are two contextual factors that make this event very different from the first miraculous feeding. First, Jesus is now serving Gentiles, rather than Jews. Yes, God had given bread to Israel in the wilderness in the past (cf. John 6:31), but that logic would not necessarily apply to Gentiles, would it? Second, even the Canaanite woman only dared to ask for what dogs receive, “crumbs that fall from their masters’ table” (Matt. 15:27). While crumbs might feed one dog, how could it possibly feed four thousand (plus women and children) of them? Thus, this section raises a major question about the extent of the messianic blessings that the Son of David would bring to Gentiles. As Blomberg notes, Jesus is revealing himself as “the Bread of life for all the world, even if a more consistent and thoroughgoing ministry to the Gentiles still awaits his resurrection.”¹¹

Covenant Blessings for the Canaanites (Matt. 15:34–39)

Once again, Jesus asks for an inventory of the available food on hand: seven loaves, and a few small fish (v. 34). As at the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus again “directs” the crowd to sit down on the ground (v. 35; cf. Matt. 14:19). While different words are used in both locations, both words suggest a direction that is more of a command, and less of a suggestion. Of the word used here in Matthew 15:35, Morris writes that it “has a military ring (of passing a command ‘along’ a line of soldiers) and points to an authoritative command.”¹² As we saw the crowds bringing their sick to Jesus, “at his feet,” in “humble submission,” so now we see Jesus directing them with orders of “authoritative command. As we noted earlier, there is a subtle theme of Jesus establishing his authority as the Son of David over these Gentiles.

Then, Matthew records that Jesus performs all the major actions that happened in the feeding of the five thousand, and that will happen again at the Lord’s supper: taking, giving thanks, breaking, and giving. The point of Matthew’s using the same language here to record this event is to demonstrate that “Gentiles are to share with Jews in the messianic banquet.”¹³ Furthermore, Matthew indirectly answer the question raised earlier about whether there would be enough to feed these Gentiles in two ways. First, Lenski notes that the language of how Jesus “broke” the bread suggests a single, punctiliar action (aorist), while the word for “gave” conveys an imperfect aspect of ongoing action: “‘he kept giving’ to the disciples, describes the multiplication of the food in Jesus’ hands... Always there was more to hand out.”¹⁴

Second, we again read that “all ate and were satisfied,” and that there were “seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over” for this crowd of “four thousand men, besides women and children” (vv. 37–38). Since the twelve baskets of leftovers for the feeding of five thousand was almost certainly symbolic, Carson observes that it would be hard to argue that the seven baskets here would not also

seven loaves of bread and a few small fish in their baskets, the disciples should ask, ‘Where are we to get bread enough in the desert to feed so great a crowd?’ (v 33 [Mark 8:4]; RSV).” (Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 450.)

¹¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 245.

¹² Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 410n84.

¹³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 601.

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 605–06.

be symbolic.¹⁵ While there are a number of suggestions, two seem most plausible in my mind. The first suggestion is that the number seven may generally speak to “completeness”—specifically completeness “of universal influence. Jesus thus offers to the whole world exactly what he first offered to Israel.”¹⁶

The second suggestion is that some scholars have heard an echo of the language of the other nations who were in the land of Canaan when Israel prepared to take their inheritance: “When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, *seven nations more numerous and mightier than you*” (Deut. 7:1). If so, then this passage is drawing drawing forward the tension of Israel’s relationship to the Canaanites, as in the earlier passage of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman. In the old covenant, God instructed his people to devote those nations completely to destruction: “you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them” (Deut. 7:2). Here, though, Jesus is bringing the bounty of his messianic feast to the nations, and he is doing so in no small measure. As Carson writes, “lest anyone think the crumbs betray a restricted blessing for Gentiles, Matthew immediately tells us of the feeding of four thousand Gentiles. If Jesus’ aphorism about the children and the dogs merely reveals *priority* in feeding, then it is hard to resist the conclusion that in the feeding of the four thousand Jesus is showing that blessing for the Gentiles is beginning to dawn.”¹⁷

Then, after feeding the Gentiles, Jesus went away to the region of Magadan to continue his ministry among the Gentiles. Jesus has more work to do in his mission to establish the rule of his reign over all the nations.

Discussion Questions

1. Where is Jesus during this story (see also Mark 7:31)? Why is Jesus’ location important for the healings as well as the story of how he feeds four thousand people? Why is it significant that Jesus here goes up on a mountain and sits down (v. 29; cf. Matt. 5:1)? What significance is there that Jesus healed so many people in this region? What response do the crowds have for Jesus’ healing ministry (v. 31)?
2. In how many ways is this story different from the story of when Jesus fed the five thousand (Matt. 14:13–21)? In how many ways are these two stories similar? Why does Matthew specifically tell us in both stories that Jesus had compassion on the crowd (Matt. 14:14; v. 32)? Why do you think that the disciples once again express concern about where they might find enough food to feed the whole crowd (v. 33)?
3. How does the small amount of food connect back to the Canaanite woman’s comment about “crumbs” from the “master’s table” (v. 34; Matt. 15:27)? What significance is there in the fact that

¹⁵ Carson, “Matthew,” 406.

¹⁶ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 246–47.

¹⁷ Carson, “Matthew,” 406.

Jesus is “directing” (i.e., commanding/ordering) the people to sit down (v. 35)? Of what significance is the language of taking, giving thanks, breaking, and giving in v. 36? What does this tell us about the Gentiles in relation to the messianic banquet?

4. What kind of care do we see from Jesus in this passage? What kind of compassion do we see from Jesus in this passage? Eternally speaking, why are mere care and compassion insufficient for what human beings truly need? How does Jesus suggest a deeper solution through this feast that he gives to thousands of Gentiles? What does that tell us about the better covenant that he came to inaugurate?