

A FEAST IN THE WILDERNESS

Matthew 14:15-21.

Of all the miracles performed by Christ this is the only one which is recorded by all four of the Gospel writers. No other miracle was witnessed by as many people. The other miracles exhibited His power and illustrated His work but this one sets forth the person of Christ as the bread of life.

After the murder of John the Baptist, Jesus knew of Herod's superstitious fears and desire to see Him. Jesus determined that He would neither satisfy his curiosity nor expose Himself to his cruelty. Oppressed with grief and longing for seclusion, Jesus crossed the lake to a place near Bethsaida.

Again, He was deprived of privacy when He craved it most. A great throng of people followed Him. The crowds followed Him with such enthusiasm that they entirely forgot to provide themselves with the necessary food. Therefore, when the evening was come, they were in the wilderness where there were no ordinary means of providing for their hunger. The sight of this weary multitude, far from home and without a meal, touched the Master. He was no ascetic, neglecting the physical and thinking only of the spiritual. Instead, He often reached the spiritual through the medium of the physical.

When Jesus looked upon that large company of weary and hungry people, He said to that matter-of-fact man, Philip, "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" Philip replied, "Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them that everyone of them may take a little." Andrew, who was always looking for opportunities to serve his Lord, remarked, "There is a lad here, who has five barley loaves, and two small fishes; but what are they among so many?" In the eyes of the disciples it was nothing. In the eyes of Christ it was sufficient. Let us analyze the incident and see what it emphasizes.

I. Human Limitations.

1. The disciples confessed their inability to feed the multitude.

Their only answer was to send them away. They did not bring the people there, they were not responsible for their condition and they were ready to wash their hands of all responsibility. This attitude towards responsibility is so natural and so easy. This is the easiest way out, and most of us follow that path when difficulties arise. But problems were made to be solved and not to be evaded. The attitude that some take with reference to charity is to disclaim all responsibility for it and refuse to do any work of that type. This is the way of least resistance. The disciples advised Jesus to "send the multitude away." In their advice was both presumption and a lack of faith. They did not understand the Lord's majesty, love, and power. Caught in such a natural pose, they never thought that their indifference would be described to all generations. If they lived long enough to read this story in the public records, doubtless they were ashamed of their attitude towards the hungry multitudes on that day.

2. The disciples magnified the insufficiency of the lunch that was available.

"There is a lad here, who has five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?" In other words, "The little that we can do is so insignificant, so unimportant that it is not worth doing." This seemed to be their confession. Men usually take delight in magnifying their weaknesses rather than their strength when responsibilities are to be met. They discredit what they can do and parade their limitations. They cling to their doubts and ignore their faith. They seek for difficulties and ignore opportunities. They invite failure rather than success. Too often men train their eyes and ears for flaws, discords, specks, and mistakes rather than for their opposites. They are inclined to live within the limitations

of their weaknesses. When they are challenged by the things of life, they are quick to determine the battle on the basis of their own weakness, forgetting the limitless wisdom and power of God offered to them.

In a western state is an immense valley known as Death Valley. It is so named because it is so far below sealevel that the temperature is excessive. It never rains there, so nothing can live. But one year there came a good downpour of rain and soaked the sands of that valley which had not been wet for years. In a few days that veritable desert burst into bloom from the seeds of a thousand flowers that had been carried by the winds and deposited there through the years but had not had moisture enough to make them sprout. These matchless potential powers had been waiting for an opportunity to fill that valley with their beauty and fragrance. If the disciples had but known it, they were facing an opportunity that day that would immortalize them, but they wanted to run away from it. It was a testing place for their faith, their vision, their courage, their grasp of the unseen possibilities. Great victories always ride in upon the wings of difficulty, but faith lies just beyond the mountain of doubt. The nearest road to it is to tunnel through.

II. Human Dedication.

1. Christ commanded them to bring what they had to Him.

Although they only had five loaves and two fishes, which was comparatively nothing for that great multitude, Christ said, "Bring them hither to me." He has a strange way of vesting little things with new values. The worthless mites of the widow became worth more than the fortunes of the rich. In the hands of the lad, the five loaves and two fishes didn't seem very much, just enough to feed himself; but in the hands of Christ, they can feed a multitude and have twelve baskets full left. Seemingly the disciples overlooked the fact that they were in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Failure is inevitable when we forget Christ and try to order our lives and shape our victories upon the basis of our limitations.

2. Christ blessed and used what they gave to Him.

It is not a question of how much men have, but how much of what they have is dedicated to Him. A life that is dedicated to Christ will never be lived in vain. This incident challenges us to dedicate our all to Christ. You may have only one talent, but if it is in the hands of Christ it can bless a nation. You may have the gift of song, of eloquence, of logic, of leadership, of organization, or of any one of the innumerable things that can be used. Whatever your talent may be, dedicate it to the glory of Christ, and then to the good of humanity.

The lad let go of his substance and let Jesus have it. He could have eaten that lunch and would have been entirely forgotten. Many are prone to look at the size of the task, and then say, "Oh, what's the use? My bit in this work amounts to nothing." Many people spend their time whining about their small possessions and their few opportunities. Their whining keeps them from using the talents which they do have. Our Lord simply asks us to dedicate just what we have to His service. No one ever presents anything to the Lord that He does not multiply it. Through the Master, the little lad reached out to many and filled their hands with food. In influence for Christ, he reached out beyond the day in which he lived, even to the days in which we live.

A Christian business man was conversing with a friend who said to him, "I don't see why you're so much interested in church. I have never derived any good from it." The Christian replied, "No. I have always noticed that dividends are paid only to stockholders." We must invest to derive dividends. When we invest in Christ's cause and the church we will derive benefits therefrom. There are no exceptions to the rule. Bring to the Lord what you have and dedicate it to Him. However small it may be, He will multiply it.

III. Human Organization.

1. Christ bade them to sit down in groups.
He would have order and not confusion. They must sit in their ranks so that the disciples could move freely among them. Each must wait until his turn came. Proper organization is important. It shortens the distance between points, it increases the speed of achievement, it lubricates the gears of operation.
2. Christ multiplied the small amount of food into sufficiency.
He took the loaves and the fishes, thanked God for them, blessed them, brake them, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the multitude and they all ate until they were filled.
3. Christ made the disciples His helpers.
He gave the food to the disciples for them to give it to the people. He constituted the disciples the channels of His supernatural beneficence. He enables them to supply the needs of the multitude by giving them what the multitude needed. In like manner, He teaches us, fills us with His grace, girds us with His power, and sends us forth as the bearers of His blessings to mankind.

Thus we see that divine gifts are distributed through human agency. He could have fed the multitude without the aid of the disciples, but He chose to use them as agents of His mercy. He thereby set His approval upon the services of men in fostering the cause of Christ. By the use of men and their money and their organizing ability, Christ builds His churches, etc. It is glorious to be a worker with the Lord, whether it is in the feeding of the multitude, or in winning souls to Christ, or in developing the characters of men. The physician may become a worker with God in healing the sick bodies of men; the teacher may become a worker with Him by enlightening the benighted minds of men; the kind-hearted neighbor may become God's helper by bringing about better living conditions in the community, and by scattering happiness and good cheer.

4. Christ instructed the disciples to gather up the fragments that remained.
Thus, He is an example of generous bounty and carefulness. He would have nothing wasted for waste is a sin, whether it be a waste of resources, of time, of energy, of talents, or of opportunity. There is no waste in the plan and program of the God of our salvation. No life is beyond His mercy and grace and love. Even seemingly worthless pieces of humanity have been transformed into worthwhile characters. This is the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Would that all might accept Him, and experience the bounty of His saving power.