

Series: Mark — Summer 2020 Series

Title: “What Jesus Can Give You”

Text: Mark 6:30-44

Date: June 28, 2020

Verse 30

Mark 6:30-44 recounts one of the most beloved Bible stories of all time — Jesus’ miraculous feeding of over five thousand people. It is the only miracle recorded by all four gospel writers. On top of this account, Matthew and Mark tell of another episode that is similar — the feeding the four thousand. The proliferation of this miracle in the gospels shows the event was undoubtedly of great importance for the local church.¹

In verse 30, Mark transitions to share one of the most well-beloved stories in all of Scripture. He says, “The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and taught” (Mark 6:30). Though our text will eventually tell of Jesus’ miracle in feeding over five thousand people, it starts by describing the disciples’ return to Jesus after they had ministered in the surrounding regions. They had been serving Jesus and fishing for men (1:17) as He had commanded them to do (6:7-13). When they returned, they huddled up and told Him about all of the places they had been, the people to whom they had preached, and the various responses they received.

Verse 31

After listening to the disciples’ report, Jesus encouraged them to take a break. Mark records, “He said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a remote place and rest for a while.’ For many people were coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat” (Mark 6:31). According to Jewish perspective, a “remote place” (the desert or wilderness) was the place where God revealed himself (Exodus 13:18). This wilderness has already been regarded as significant in Mark’s Gospel (Mark 1:4). Luke 9:10 tells us that the particular “remote place” of our text was near Bethsaida.

The Koine Greek presents the words translated “by yourselves” in an emphatic sense. Jesus used strong verbiage to emphasize His disciples’ need for personal refreshment.² Jesus has already shown the need for solitude by His own actions in Mark’s Gospel. He Himself got away to a quiet place to rest and spend time with the Heavenly Father in Mark 1:35. Now He teaches His disciples the need for them to doing something similar.

The word translated “rest” can mean “to regain strength.” It was often used as a military term for soldiers taking a hiatus from their duties.³ Jesus employs the term with an aorist imperative in the original language. The tense and mood of the verb commands

¹ Brooks, 107.

² Schnabel, 149.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 80.

a specific action with a sense of urgency.⁴ In the original language, the middle voice is used. It gives the idea of “refresh yourselves.”⁵

We live in a society that often champions ceaseless activity as a sign of virtue. The Bible espouses a different type of value system. It encourages us to exercise diligence in regard to work (Proverbs 10:4), but it also upholds the importance of systematic rest and relaxation. The Lord wants us to enjoy life in His creation, and He knows that we need both vigorous work and active rest to experience a full-orbed life.

Regular rest should be a priority for God’s people. The fourth commandment reveals such to be true (Exodus 20:8-11). Our Lord’s entreaty to His disciples in verse 31 does as well. The Creator has concern that His children get the self-care they need. Ryle has commented: “Our Lord knows well that his servants are flesh as well as spirit, and have bodies as well as souls. He knew that at best they have a treasure in earthen vessels, and are themselves compassed with many infirmities. He shows them that he does not expect from them more than their bodily strength can do.”⁶

One of our modern problems with rest is that we often fill our off days with too many activities and responsibilities. Because of this we don’t experience the refreshment we need from our Sabbaths. We must take personal responsibility to rejuvenate ourselves regularly. Jesus knows that we need such rest and restoration. This is why the Lord has given us a full day of rest each week (Genesis 2:1-3). We are finite and we need rest.

It would do us well to remember these realities. Does not the Great Commandment even contain a reference to the need of appropriate self-care? With the words “as yourself” (Matthew 22:38), we are taught that we should have a natural regard for our own health. Sure, we must be on guard against ungodly self-love (2 Timothy 3:2), but we must make sure we exhibit adequate care for our own well-being. In our text, Jesus encouraged His disciples to take a break because He knew that discipleship isn’t all about performing for God. The way of the Master will indeed call us to do things for God (6:8-13), but discipleship is first about “being” with Jesus (3:14). We get the proper order reversed sometimes, and we make what we do for Christ more important than what we are in Christ. We spiritually sabotage ourselves when we forsake abiding in Christ (John 15:5) on account of our activity for Christ.

Verse 32

At Jesus’ summon, His disciples retreated to rest. Mark tells us, “So they went away in the boat by themselves to a remote place” (Mark 6:32). In light of all their service on Jesus’ behalf (6:7-13 and 30), and in light of the fact that they were likely beginning to face resistance from the Herodians (3:6 and 6:14), the disciples needed a break. Jesus’ command demonstrates His care for His disciples. Our Lord is concerned about our well-

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 80.

⁵ Robertson, 314.

⁶ Ryle, 98.

being. He does not regard us as mere robots who must perform according to His liking. We are not expected to coldly receive His inputs and blindly produce His desired outputs. Jesus has compassion towards those living in the human predicament (Hebrews 4:15). He desires for us to be healthy and holy — fully functioning, vibrant human beings who experience His goodness. He wants to have an optimal level of well-being in the spiritual, emotional, and physical domains of life.

There is good reason for us to be vigilant concerning rest. Our text shows that Jesus commanded His disciples to embrace inactivity for the purpose of refreshment. Furthermore, rest should be a priority because it is used as a metaphor in the New Testament to describe the Christian experience (Matthew 11:29-30 and Hebrews 4:10-11). Scripture also gives us an admonition concerning the need for rest on numerous occasions. Proverbs 23:4 says, “Don’t wear yourself out to get rich; because you know better, stop!”

Verse 33

Despite their attempts to get away, Jesus and the disciples couldn’t get the personal refreshment they so desperately needed. The crowds wouldn’t give them space. Mark records, “But many saw them leaving and recognized them, and they ran on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them” (Mark 6:33). Jesus and His disciples leave one locale by boat, seeking a remote alcove on the seashore for rest. Unfortunately, people notice their departure and they mark their route of travel. Crowds run around the seashore on foot, anticipating the exact spot at which Jesus and His disciples will land.

It seems that the rest area was about three miles north of Capernaum. The people who ran to hear Jesus teach ended up covering almost the same distance as a modern 5k fun run. By the time the weary ministers reach their destination, a throng of people is waiting on them. Again in Mark, we see Beatlemania-like hysteria around the ministry of Jesus (1:33; 2:2; 3:8; 4:36; and 5:21). As in Mark 1:35-37, our Lord can hardly get a reprieve because of the people who want to see and hear Him.

Verse 34

Verse 34 introduces us to the five thousand who eventually need food. It says, “When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd and had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then he began to teach them many things” (Mark 6:34). As Jesus and His disciples approached the seashore, they saw the elevated land in front of them, rising up out of the water towards the mountains. On the green grass they saw a mass of humanity, rushing down the slope in the direction of the seashore. The people, clothed in their customary white garb, literally looked like sheep against the backdrop of the pastureland. They also figuratively seemed like sheep.

When Jesus first saw the people on the embankment, He “had compassion on them.” The word translated “compassion” carries the idea of feeling sympathy for another person.⁷ It speaks of more than just a mere concern for another. It portrays a

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 80.

concern for another that compels a person to care for another. Interestingly, it is only used of Jesus in the New Testament (Matthew 9:36, 14:14, 15:32, 18:27, 20:34; Mark 1:41, 6:34, 8:2, 9:22; Luke 7:13, 10:33, and 15:20). Our Lord is a sympathetic High Priest (Hebrews 4:15) who has great concern for our struggles.

Jesus' compassion was driven by the fact that the people appeared "like sheep without a shepherd." By speaking of the people as helpless sheep, Mark's Gospel employs an Old Testament image.⁸ The Torah used the picture in Numbers 27:17 to speak of the need for spiritual leadership amongst God's people.⁹ Considering the recent depiction of Herod in Mark's Gospel (Mark 6:14-29), the words of the prophet Jeremiah were applicable to the first-century setting: "My people were lost sheep; their shepherds led them astray, guiding them the wrong way in the mountains. They wandered from mountain to hill; they forgot their resting place" (Jeremiah 50:6).

The primary idea behind the shepherd metaphor is not one of food. Instead, the focus is first on the need for leadership.¹⁰ Sheep are animals who can't survive on their own. They need someone to guide them to food and water.¹¹ Jesus was concerned that the people did not have the spiritual guidance they needed.¹² He had compassion primarily because of the people's spiritual needs, not primarily because of their physical needs. In fact, the physical needs of the people won't be obvious until verse 36.

The five thousand weren't homeless vagabonds in need of a free meal. Our Lord didn't perform charity work. The folks were indeed hungry, but they had food at their homes. Jesus' main concern was that the people didn't have proper spiritual leadership. This was in keeping with a concern of the Law and the Prophets (Numbers 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17; and Ezekiel 34:5).

Jesus' concern for the spiritual well-being of the people is seen through His commitment "to teach them many things." Mark uses a present tense infinitive that indicates the continuance of an act. It shows that Jesus provided a lengthy teaching session. At other points in Scripture, we see that God's people sometimes need prolonged saturation in God's Word (Nehemiah 8:3 and Acts 20:7-9). The duration of Jesus' teaching session explains the reason behind the people's need for food. They had engaged in vigorous travel to get an opportunity to hear Jesus teach, running what would be the equivalent of a modern 5k foot race (verse 33), and then they sat and listened to Jesus teach for long amount of time. No wonder the crowd was so hungry!

Despite the focus food often gets in our story, it is important to note the priority in Jesus' ministry to the crowd. Before feeding them with food, Jesus fed them with truth. They needed such a feeding first, because they were the victims of unjust leaders.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 80.

⁹ Brooks, 108.

¹⁰ Robertson, 315.

¹¹ Schnabel, 149.

¹² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 80.

Two groups of people were often viewed as shepherds in the Jewish mentality - priests and politicians. As to the first, the Pharisees made for horrible shepherds. On one occasion, Jesus called them “blind guides” (Matthew 23:16). They were known for enforcing legalistic burdens that sucked the life out of people (Matthew 23:4). As to the second class of shepherd, Herod was no better. We have just seen the hideous nature of his heart in 6:14-29.

Knowing the state of the leaders in first-century Canaan, Jesus had compassion on the people because they didn’t have a better leader. He fed the crowd out of pity, but He did something more as well. He provided a sign that demonstrated He was the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). He wanted to prove that He was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy (Jeremiah 23:1-6).¹³

Verses 35 and 36

In Mark 6:35-36, the disciples express concern regarding the people’s growing need for food: “When it grew late, his disciples approached him and said, “This place is deserted, and it is already late. Send them away so that they can go into the surrounding countryside and villages to buy themselves something to eat.” The time was after 3:00 pm. Sunset seems to be near, based on a comparison of our text with other gospel details in Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:47; and John 6:16.¹⁴ It seems that the people, having sat underneath Jesus’ teaching for sometime in one locale, were in quite a predicament. They needed food. They had exerted a lot of energy when they ran to meet Jesus (verse 33), and each had a long return journey ahead of them. They needed the energy food could provide, but they were a good distance from home.

Food wasn’t readily available. It was unlikely one could purchase provisions for such a large group of people in such a location. Bethsaida seems to have been the nearest town.¹⁵ It was really small. Capernaum was nearby, but it had only had a population of two to six hundred people.¹⁶ Smaller towns in Galilee weren’t known for having public markets for shopping.¹⁷ Even if they wanted to, it is improbable that the surrounding villages could have provided enough food to feed the great crowd of people. Most simply weren’t big enough.

Verse 37

In verse 37, Jesus turns the table on His disciples’ request by telling them to take care of the people’s hunger. Mark records, ““You give them something to eat,’ He responded. They said to Him, ‘Should we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?’” (Mark 6:37). It may seem strange that Jesus would give His disciples such instruction.

¹³ Schnabel, 150.

¹⁴ Robertson, 315.

¹⁵ Robertson, 316.

¹⁶ Schnabel, 150.

¹⁷ Schnabel, 151.

He surely knew that they had no way of feeding the crowd. Perhaps He gave the impossible command in order to point out His disciples' complete inability to take care of the situation. In order to experience Jesus' abundant provision, disciples must stay aware of their helplessness apart from Him. They must learn to draw from His power and strength (John 15:5).¹⁸

With His strong command, Jesus may have also meant to show His disciples their responsibility to serve as shepherds. In a sense, His command contained a reiteration of the training He gave them back in 6:7-13. In light of the awful spiritual care provided by Herod (6:14-29), the Twelve were to go feed the people. Unbeknownst to them at the time, His disciples were a fulfillment of Jeremiah 33:12: "This is what the Lord of Armies says: In this desolate place—without people or animals—and in all its cities there will once more be a grazing land where shepherds may rest flocks."

When Jesus restored Peter to the ministry in a post-resurrection appearance, He double-downed on the apostle's responsibility to shepherd God's people (John 21:15-19). Later, after the Lord's ascension, the apostles would gain a conviction concerning their responsibility to serve in such a way. Peter himself would write: "I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:1-4).

In response to Jesus' command, the disciples responded, "Should we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?" A denarii made a day's wage for a farmer, so the amount in view was about seven months worth of earnings for the people present.¹⁹ There is a tone of disrespect in the disciples' retort.²⁰ They likely had enough money to purchase food for all of the people. Jesus had some serious financial contributors to His ministry at this point (Luke 8:3). However, the disciples seem to have thought that such an expense was a waste of funds. Maybe Judas drove the doubt. A similar skepticism concerning the proper use of funds on the part of the disciples is seen in Mark 14:5.

Verse 38

In response to His disciples' rude inquiry, Jesus replied, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see" (Mark 6:38). The Twelve answered back, "Five, and two fish" (Mark 6:38). John tells us a boy had the items in a lunch he had brought (John 6:9). There is most likely no significance in the numbers. They simply underscore the profound nature of the miracle. Jesus fed five thousand people with only two fish and five pieces of flatbread.²¹

The fish were surely local, most likely from the Sea of Galilee. The surrounding region was known for its fishing industry. The bread would have been round flat bread. A "loaf" was nearly twenty inches in diameter and about a third of an inch thick.²² Perhaps, they were similar, in some ways, to modern pita bread. The small provisions were all that was available. It would surely be impossible to feed such a large horde with such minuscule rations. The stage was set for a miracle.

Verse 39

¹⁸ Schnabel, 151.

¹⁹ Brooks, 109.

²⁰ Brooks, 109.

²¹ Schnabel, 152.

²² Schnabel, 152.

After seeing what His disciples had in their hands, Jesus “instructed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass” (Mark 6:39). Through His instruction, Jesus demonstrated that He was the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. The prophets foretold of a better shepherd who would come to feed and lead God’s people (Jeremiah 23:4). Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord had declared: “I will establish over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will shepherd them. He will tend them himself and will be their shepherd” (Ezekiel 34:23).²³

Through His instruction, Jesus also proved that He is the Lord who makes His children lay “down in green pastures” (Psalm 23:2). He would speak straightforwardly about this subject in John’s Gospel, saying, “A thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:10-11). In Christ we have a Shepherd for our souls. We have one to care for our needs and emotions. He has promised to guide us and provide for us. We only need to keep our eyes of faith on Him. When we stay in a posture of dependence upon Him, we will find the rest and satisfaction we desire.

Verse 40

Heeding Jesus’ instruction, the disciples led the crowd to sit: “So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties” (Mark 6:40). The word translated “groups” is the word from which we get our “symposium.”²⁴ Practically speaking, the people sat in rows to make food distribution easier. However, there could have been a dual purpose in the seating posture. The arrangement was similar to the one used by Jewish pupils when they listened to their rabbi (Mark 3:32). Maybe the scene in our text was meant to illustrate humanity’s need for teaching and guidance. As the people sat in rows circled around Jesus awaiting their food, they looked like eager pupils receiving life-giving provision from their Master Rabbi.

Verse 41

In verse 41, Jesus distributes the food: “He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed and broke the loaves. He kept giving them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all” (Mark 6:41). Our verse seems to contain the moment in which the actual miracle occurred. As Jesus broke the bread, the pieces were supernaturally multiplied. When this story was recounted to others, Jews were likely reminded of one of Elijah’s miraculous feats (1 Kings 17:8-16).

In Jewish culture, the head of the family was responsible for standing at the head of the table, saying a blessing, breaking the food, and distributing it.²⁵ The word translated “blessed” in our text means “to praise” or “to give thanks.” First-century Jews had a strict rule that no meal could be eaten without first returning thanks.²⁶ There was a common prayer that was usually uttered over every meal. It said, “Praise be to you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who makes bread to come forth from the earth, and who provides for all that you have created.”²⁷ Through Jesus’ prayer, we perhaps see a precedent for our the prayers we offer before our meals.

²³ Ferguson, 93.

²⁴ Schnabel, 152.

²⁵ Schnabel, 152.

²⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 81.

²⁷ Edwards, 192.

The same sequence of verbs in our text will be used later in Mark's Gospel to depict Jesus' distribution of the Lord's Supper.²⁸ Mark seems to intentionally use parallel language for the two events. John 6:4 tells us that this miracle took place at the time of Passover. It was probably one year before Jesus' final Passover with His disciples, the meal at which He instituted the Lord's Supper we practice to this day. Jesus' actions in our text seem to draw attention to the sacred ordinance of the Church (Matthew 26:26-27).²⁹ Ultimately, the miracle before us evokes thoughts of the body and blood of Jesus. It points to Calvary, reminding us that we have the most important provision we need in Christ — rescue from sin and death! Jesus was the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us!

Verse 42

After the food was served, everyone ate. But they didn't just eat; they ate until they were full! Mark records, "Everyone ate and was satisfied" (Mark 6:42). The fact that the people received sufficient nourishment from the food is proof that each person didn't just get a tiny morsel of fish and bread. Our Lord indeed performed a miracle.³⁰ Each person left the grassy knoll filled with food. Jesus' miraculous act serves as a sign that demonstrates the way in which our Lord is faithful to provide for our daily, physical needs (Matthew 6:11 and 33; Philippians 4:19; and 2 Peter 1:3).

But it points to something far greater as well. Through His miracle, Jesus showed that He can spiritually provide for all who trust in Him. The real, physical, and tangible bread served as an object lesson (Hebrews 2:4). It pointed to the way in which Jesus meets our greatest need — salvation from sin and all of its consequences. Our Lord spoke plainly about this truth in John's Gospel, saying, "I am the bread of life...no one who comes to me will ever be hungry, and no one who believes in me will ever be thirsty again" (John 6:35). Jesus provides salvation from sin and death. He fully and completely satisfies the souls of those who trust Him (John 1:16).

Verse 43

As if fully feeding five thousand people with a few pieces of food wasn't impressive enough, there were leftovers from the meal! Mark tells us, "They picked up twelve baskets full of pieces of bread and fish" (Mark 6:43). The baskets were likely made of wicker. Such containers were often used by the Jews for food storage. They customarily held anywhere from twenty to forty liters of dry goods.

Mark's mention of the leftovers is important for a few reasons. First, it proves that the feeding was a miracle. Jesus didn't just give everyone a small nibble of bread.³¹ He miraculously turned two fish and five pieces of flatbread into a feast. No sleight of hand or ancient trickery was involved. Nobody could argue that the people weren't fed. The baskets of leftovers proved otherwise.

Secondly, there is important truth nested in the number of baskets on the grassy knoll. Twelve has already had a place of prominence in Mark's Gospel (Mark 5:25 and 42). It is likely present in our text to make an allusion to the purpose of Jesus' work. One cannot think of the number twelve without thinking about the Twelve Tribes of Israel. When Jesus stepped upon the stage of Jewish history, He presented Himself as the fulfillment of God's promises to His chosen people. Through the incarnation, our Lord would do something new. Israel had twelve tribes, and Jesus had twelve disciples (Mark 3:14 and 6:7), and Jesus would perform a work

²⁸ Schnabel, 153.

²⁹ Robertson, 316.

³⁰ Brooks, 109.

³¹ Schnabel, 153.

that would bring the Gentiles into God's people (Ephesians 2:13-14). The prophetic significance of the number twelve is portrayed by the twenty-four elders of Revelation 4:4.

Lastly, the leftovers are a reminder of the way in which the Lord lavishly provides for His people. God's grace is not meager. It gives us "everything required for life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). As His children, we are promised that we will never lack what we need. We can trust that He is good and that His provisions are enough. Never should we fear of lack. Scripture says, He "is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us" (Ephesians 3:20). May we trust in this truth. May the baskets of leftovers serve as a perpetual reminder that God is good and that He will look out for us!

Verse 44

In verse 44, Mark concludes his account of the miraculous event by giving more statistics from the meal. He says, "Now those who had eaten the loaves were five thousand men" (Mark 6:44). This size of the crowd was enormous by first-century standards. It was especially big for the region, considering the fact that Nazareth only had a population of around 500. Other towns in the area — Capernaum, Bethsaida, and Chorazin — had populations of one to three thousand, and these were the largest towns in the region.³² For five thousand people to be present, people must have flocked from all around to see Jesus. Some villages may have been totally shut down, like ghost towns, because of the mass exodus of folks who went to hear Him preach.

The number is especially impressive when we consider the language of our text. In the Greek, Mark does not use the generic word for humanity that appears frequently in the New Testament. He uses a word that specifically refers to the masculine gender.³³ He is referring to males. Five thousand men were present. There were undoubtedly a large host of women and children in attendance as well.³⁴ Including them, the total number of people could have been as high as 10,000 to 20,000 people. Jesus indeed performed a supernatural miracle! And He did it to demonstrate that He is the Good Shepherd who loves all and who can provide for all!

³² Brooks, 110.

³³ Edwards, 193.

³⁴ Schnabel, 153.