

### **Feeding the Crowd (14:13–21)**

(Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14)

In this story, Jesus is presenting himself as a Moses like character feeding Israel. However, Moses provided bread for the body only; Jesus provides bread for the body and soul for he is the bread of life. We read in Exodus how God through Moses provided bread.

*“...And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat.” (Exodus 16:13–15, ESV)*

**Matthew 14:13** *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.*

**when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there....** It is possible that Jesus withdrew in sorrow over John’s reported death, however, the place he withdrew, outside Herod’s territory, suggest that “...what Jesus hears in 14:13 is the report *that Herod is taking notice of his ministry.*”<sup>1</sup> “John’s execution signaled danger to Jesus’ life and limb in that John had announced the coming of Jesus as someone stronger than he and therefore more threatening to Herod (3:11–12) .... So in line with Jesus’ having told his disciples to flee persecution (10:23), he himself withdrew “from there.”<sup>2</sup>

Now when John is murdered, he does so again. It was common for Jesus to avoid unnecessary conflict by withdrawing until things died down. “In both of the earlier places where ‘heard’ is followed by ‘withdrew’ (2:22; 4:12; 12:15; 15:21), a potential danger is met by withdrawal.

Earlier withdrawals were a response to the threats of the religious leaders of the nation. But now in 14:13, Jesus is withdrawing in response to the political leader of the nation. “A “withdrawal” by boat from Capernaum would take him outside the territory of Antipas if it took him to the other side of the Jordan inflow (only a couple of miles to the east), into the tetrarchy of Philip.”<sup>3</sup> This would be near Bethsaida.

**from there....** “The last we heard of his whereabouts, he was in his hometown of Nazareth (13:53–58). But we’re still in a flashback to the earlier incident of John’s execution and its immediate aftermath. “From there” doesn’t mean “from Nazareth,” then. That meaning wouldn’t have made sense of Jesus’ withdrawing “in a boat,” anyway; for Nazareth is landlocked. “From there” means, therefore, that he withdrew from his house in the seaside city of Capernaum, just as in 13:53 (with 13:36) on an earlier occasion. The “deserted place” to which he withdrew to be “by himself” will make it difficult for Herod’s arm to reach him....”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 738.

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 64.

<sup>3</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 560). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>4</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament: Verse-by-Verse Explanations with a Literal Translation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 64.

**by himself....** **By himself** would include his disciples as well; he did not crew the boat alone. **By himself** also suggest he was actually successful in withdrawing himself from the crowd. The crowd showed up later. Later, after the crowd and disciples leave, Jesus “*he went up on the mountain by himself to pray.*” (Matthew 14:23, ESV). **He is probably returning to what he was doing before the crowd first arrived.**

**they followed him on foot....** This “means they had to travel several miles around the lake and across the upper Jordan, possibly having seen the direction Jesus and his disciples were rowing or hearing his plans.”<sup>5</sup>

**Matthew 14:14** *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.*

**he went ashore or coming out he saw ....** The word “**ashore**” is not a part of the Greek text which literally says “**coming out he saw.**” Where did he come out from? It is not said, although it was probably from a secluded place of prayer. It is not at all likely that the crowd beat Jesus and the disciples on foot. But instead, the boat arrived first and Jesus was in a private place praying. John tells the story this way:

*“After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”” (John 6:1–5, ESV)*

**He was not coming ashore to meet those on shore that had arrived first but “coming out” he saw “a large crowd coming toward him,” not he towards them.** I think the disciples’ recommendation that Jesus dismiss the crowd so that they might go to the unnamed local villages to find food, suggest **the long, time consuming, trip necessary to get back to Capernaum.** Coming or going, it took a great deal of time on foot; longer than such a trip would take on a boat. Boating is faster than walking.

**compassion<sup>6</sup>....** “Matthew rarely gives his hearers/readers a glimpse into the “inner life” of Jesus. Instead, like most ancient narratives, **Matthew’s story reveals the character of the Christ, so to speak, chiefly by describing what Jesus does.**”<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ life is show and tell. When John from prison sent his disciples to ask just who Jesus was, “*...Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.”*” (Matthew 11:4, ESV)

And so Jesus revealed himself by his teaching and his miracles. He did not simply talk the talk, he walked the walk as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (vol. 1; Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 565.

<sup>6</sup> *compassion* σπλαγχνίζομαι “...to experience great affection and compassion for someone—‘to feel compassion for, to have great affection for, love, compassion.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 749.

But in this case, Matthew is so moved that he translates Jesus' actions into a description of the emotional state driving those actions, compassion. Ultimately, it is actions that confirm emotions. "*Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*" (Matthew 7:20, ESV)

**healed their sick....** "The word used for the poor sick whom Jesus heals in our text is a word used only by Matthew and used only here—*arrōstous*—it means "**the wretched**"<sup>8</sup> "But the focus on healing suggests that the popular interest in Jesus remains, as it was in 4:24–25 and will be again in 14:35–36, concentrated on the desire to benefit from his miraculous power."<sup>9</sup> **It is sad to think that many of these accepted the physical care and material bread but at that point lost interest in him, ignoring the spiritual healing and the bread of life.**

**Matthew 14:15** *Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves."*

**Evening....** "'Evening" (*opsios*) is a flexible word, referring to any period from **mid-afternoon to just after sunset.**"<sup>10</sup>

**the day is now over....** The hour for the evening meal is probably in view, it is time for dinner.

**Matthew 14:16** *But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

**you....** The pronoun is emphatic and is understood as YOU give them something to eat.

**Matthew 14:17** *[But] They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish."*

**[But]....** With the word **but**, found in the Greek text, the disciples are contrasting their situation with Jesus command, "*you give them something to eat*" **but** "*we have only five loaves here and two fish.*" **It can't be done.**

**We have only five loaves here and two fish.** "The disciples, like us today, are quick with reasons for their inability to perform the task imposed by Jesus."<sup>11</sup> Philip is overwhelmed with the command:

*"Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little." (John 6:7, ESV)*

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 67.

<sup>9</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 561). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 341). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

<sup>11</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 14:17.

“...they cannot do what Jesus has asked because they lack sufficient resources.”<sup>12</sup> It would take “two hundred denarii or two-thirds of a year’s wage to purchase enough food.”<sup>13</sup> In our era, that would be something like \$20,000 to \$25,000 of food. If the crowd was 20,000 people that would equal \$1.16 per person. Philip says that would not be enough to feed this crowd even *a little*. That being the case, the crowd would probably be larger than this.

**Matthew 14:18 And he said, “Bring them here to me.”**

Apparently a crowd this size would be scattered over many acres. They must be gathered if they are to be fed.

**Matthew 14:19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.**

**grass....** This suggest that it was late spring or early summer—when grass was available. By late summer and winter, it would be burned up by the heat and dead. This would be, perhaps, a year before his crucifixion, which was in the spring March/April.

At the Lord’s Supper we read:

“Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, “Take, eat; this is my body.”” (Matthew 26:26, ESV)

Note the strong verbal parallels with 14:19 and 26:26. Perhaps “the institution of the Lord’s Supper is strongly anticipated by Matthew’s description of how Jesus takes the food, pronounces a blessing, breaks the bread, and distributes the food for the gathered guests to eat.”<sup>14</sup>

**Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass....** Mark is more precise:

“Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties.” (Mark 6:39–40, ESV)

“The orderly arrangement (Mark) made it easy to count them and to feed them.”<sup>15</sup>

**and said a blessing....** “A common form of prayer before eating was “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who bringest forth bread from the earth.””<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 591). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>13</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (vol. 1; Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 566.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 751.

<sup>15</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Mt 14:19.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 342). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

**Matthew 14:20** *And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.*

**were satisfied....** "... means to have enough, and more than enough, to eat (cf. 5:6). It was used primarily of fattening cattle (cf. Luke 15:16). **A less elegant version might be "were stuffed."**<sup>17</sup>

"The fact that everyone was "stuffed" (χορτάζω [chortádzō] means to "eat to the full, be satisfied") fits the idea of the messianic banquet in which all the hungry are to be completely satisfied (cf. Matt 5:6; Luke 6:21)."<sup>18</sup>

**"Matthew allows no doubt on the scale of the miracle. "All" ate, and each had all they could eat ...—and even then far more was left over than had been available at the beginning."**<sup>19</sup>

**twelve baskets<sup>20</sup>....** They were rather similar to small picnic baskets. It is somewhat reasonable if not probable that each of the twelve disciples carried one most days as they were often on the road. That would help explain the number 12 and why there were any baskets there in the first place. Yet, many in the crowd may have brought picnic lunches as well.

In time, the crowd took notice of what had just happened.

*"When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"*" (John 6:14, ESV)

**"The fact that "twelve" baskets are referred to in this pericope probably symbolizes the twelve tribes of ... a portrayal of messianic fulfillment brought to the Jews."**<sup>21</sup>

**Matthew 14:21** *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

**five thousand men....** The full crowd could have exceeded twenty thousand when the women and children were added.

## Conclusion

Let's revisit our context. We just read about a recent banquet by Herod. "The juxtaposition of Herod's [preceding] banquet and Jesus' banquet [here] is powerful. At Herod's banquet there is pride and arrogance, scheming, and even murder. It takes place at a royal court. At Jesus' banquet there is healing, truth, and sharing. It takes

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<sup>17</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>18</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew* (vol. 1; Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 567.

<sup>19</sup> France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 563). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

<sup>20</sup> *twelve baskets κόφινος* "A wicker basket.... The *kóphinos* was proverbially the Jewish traveling basket.... The Jews carried their food in these wicker baskets while traveling in Gentile countries to avoid defilement." Zodiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

<sup>21</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (vol. 33B; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 418.

place in a 'deserted' place...like the wilderness in which ancient Israel was fed with manna."<sup>22</sup>

John has been murdered and Jesus has fled to a Gentile area out of Herod Antipas territory. Here Jesus performs a miracle of great proportion.

There are in fact several similar miracles in the Old Testament. "Examples include 1 Kgs 17:8–16 (**Elijah and the jar of meal**); 2 Kgs 4:1–7 (**Elijah and the vessels of oil**); 4:42–44 (**Elijah feeds one hundred men**) ...."<sup>23</sup> All these are Elijah stories. It is John who came in the power of Elijah although he did no miracle. It is Jesus that John points to and it is Jesus that performs the New Testament counterpart to the Elijah stories. Is Matthew making a connection between the two Elijahs? He does not say, but it catches one's attention. Elijah provided for the material things of life. He acted because he knew God cares about our material wellbeing. Jesus acted because he also cares about our material wellbeing.

This is not Jesus' only miracle that addresses the material needs of his children, there is also the wine at **the wedding at Cana**, John 2:1-11 and **the miracle of the net and fish** in John 21:4-8. And, **we should read these stories of provision in tandem with laying up treasure on earth and in heaven, Matthew 6:19-24, as well as anxiety over food, drink and clothing, Matthew 6:25-34.** Each tells a significant part of a common story. **God cares about the now n' now; but one must also care about the by n' by. We need bread that nourishes the body; he is the bread of life that nourishes the soul. God knows that both are necessary.**

*"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35, ESV)*

"At the consummation of the age, God's people will be raised with body and soul together, and the joy will overflow at the banquet populated by real, holy, living, flesh-and-blood people—who will eat, if we may trust the image that runs through Scripture's entire length."<sup>24</sup>

**In the provision of the mana by God through Moses (Exodus 16:13–15), in the provision of food by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:8–16; 2 Kgs 4:1–7; 4:42–44) in the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13-21) and later the 4,000 (Matthew 15:32-39) by God through Jesus, and in the provision of the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29), we see how all point to God's ultimate eschatological provision in the marriage supper of the lamb (Revelation 19:6-10; 21:2-22:6). It is this picture that the audience this day was to apprehend. This is God's manna, this is God's savior, this is God's eternal hope for his children.**

All this is played out on the stage of life before this audience with very few words. Jesus expected them to put all this together in their minds and see this bigger picture. He expected a serious understanding of scripture of his audience; he still does.

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<sup>22</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13–28* (vol. 2, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 67.

<sup>23</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (vol. 2; International Critical Commentary; London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 480.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 751.