

THE POWER TO MEET NEEDS

John 6:5-11, 26-31, 47-51

You've heard of having too much money at the end of the month. Our resources can run out before all the needs are met. For a lot of people this is an ongoing experience. They are like the person described in the song *Sixteen Tons* – you're "another day older and deeper in debt." For others, the overwhelming need might be failing health or some dreaded disease. You could be overwhelmed with relationship problems or emotional issues or any number of addictions. It really is overwhelming to think about all the possible overwhelming needs in the world.

It is not so unusual to hear about famine in third world countries and see reports that people have died by the thousands because of lack of food. Relief organizations send food to these people; however, their efforts are hindered by groups that are fighting each other for control of the country and many people (who have no interest in who is in control) are suffering. In this country there are the homeless people who can't seem to get help and don't have the slightest idea from where their next meal is coming. Many others suffer from malnutrition or other health problems simply because they do not eat the right kinds of food. In a world where we pay farmers to NOT grow food and where there are all kinds of organizations dedicated to helping people and where nutritionists know what constitutes a healthy diet, all these problems seem rather incongruous. In some cases there are evil people in power who would rather see people die than for themselves to lose control. In the case of the homeless, there seems to be unconcern in the various governmental organizations that profess they want to help people. And in the case of the malnourished there is rampant lack of knowledge at work for those people who either don't know the consequences of eating improperly or refuse to change once they do know.

We find the same problems exist in the spiritual realm. There is spiritual starvation, spiritual hunger and spiritual malnutrition. Some parts of the world are under the control of pagan religions and it is very difficult to get the word of God into these areas. The church is not free to operate and it is illegal to witness to people. In our own nation, there are people who would believe and receive help, if someone were to minister to them. Yet, even though we have many churches that recognize that their mission is to find these folks and help them, many never get reached. Others are surrounded by good spiritual food and yet they are spiritually weak and sickly because they ignore the spiritual truths and adopt humanistic ideas as their basis for life.

Spiritual hunger is not as easily recognized as physical hunger and because of this difficulty in recognizing it for what it is; many people search for what they think will bring satisfaction. Many times what they find in their search is comparable to what the skid row bums find in the garbage cans – they consume it and they compound their problems with food poisoning. Jesus recognized that people have spiritual hunger and He taught "truth" to the people who came to Him. What does it take to be successful in meeting needs?

See the Need – 6:5-7

⁵ Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?" ⁶ This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do. ⁷ Philip answered Him, "Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little." John 6:5-7 (NASB95)

This event was almost a year later in the ministry of Jesus following the healing of the man at the pool in Jerusalem. In the meantime, word had spread among the people and large crowds would come to hear and to find healing. During this intervening period Jesus had sent the disciples out (in pairs) to minister to others in the various cities and they had returned (see Mark

6 and Luke 9). Another significant event had occurred just before this trip to the mountains and that was the death of John the Baptist (see Matthew 14). We see from Mark's account (chapter 6) that the pressing opportunities (demands) of the crowds were such that Jesus and His disciples did not have time to eat. We find a lesson for life in what Jesus did in taking Himself and His disciples out of the intense, demanding situation and getting away from it to find a time to rest.

Jesus picked His times and the circumstances. He could have gone into Jerusalem and condemned Herod for the terrible act of killing John the Baptist; however, the timing was not right. Instead, He sought solitude and withdrew to be alone. When we encounter evil in our present world, the best approach may be via the prayer closet rather than the picket line.

What lessons can we learn from this passage about Jesus feeding the five thousand that speak to what we can do when faced with overwhelming needs? Jesus saw the need and brought it to the disciples' attention. In this case, the situation was presented to Philip who was challenged to find a way to feed this multitude. How many times does God show us such needs today and gives us a challenge to respond? Many times we start where Philip did with trying to meet such needs with physical, human resources. The first and most obvious lesson is our inadequacy to deal with the gamut of needs we have as human beings. Let's assume that we realize that inadequacy, what do we do about it?

What was the initial reaction of the disciples to the need? In Luke's account, one suggestion was "Send them away so they can go buy something to eat." This is the "everyone fends for himself" approach to the problems of life. Would that have worked in this situation? While it might be hard to imagine that a crowd this large would be able to find enough food in the villages and nearby towns, however, they would have been able to survive and return to their homes. This approach is pretty much like the frontier American ideal of being fiercely independent and "making do" with everyone taking care of his own needs. That is a workable approach to most problems we face but it is not adequate when the needs are truly overwhelming. In the "Little House on the Prairie" scenario, if the situation for one family became overwhelming, then the neighbors stepped in to help. What happens when all the neighbors are in the same situation?

What made this situation overwhelming? It actually started earlier in the day. Jesus and His disciples were attempting to get away for some rest and relaxation. However, many people had needs and others were curious and they showed up wherever He was. The easy thing would have been to have sent them away as soon as they arrived and then Jesus and the disciples could have gone about their intentions to have a retreat.

That did not happen. What prevented this from happening? A simple answer is the **compassion** that Jesus had for the crowd caused a change in their plans. He saw them as sheep without a shepherd. He taught them and the time slipped away so that something needed to be done. It was still not too late to send them away; however, that was not done and now we see this extension of compassion had caused a crisis. *The crisis came about because human resources were not sufficient for compassion to really work with such a great need.*

I wonder if this is why we don't have more people involved in helping others. We look around us and see the needs and know that those who are hurting need help. However, we conclude that it is too big for us to do anything with our limited resources to really make a difference. We might even go so far as to think that we couldn't really help if we used all our savings and everything in our checking account. The only solution is to take a step of faith and start with what we do have or can find and entrust that to God who created everything when there was nothing.

Look for Resources – 6:8-11

⁸ One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to Him, ⁹ "There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are these for so many people?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. John 6:8-11 (NASB95)

Notice a key difference in the emphasis of the disciples versus that of Jesus. The disciples were focused on how limited their resources were and Jesus directed them to look at what they did have as a starting point for taking action. You could argue that what was about to happen could be compared to the message that Jesus had communicated in the parable of the mustard seed. Start with what you have (regardless of how small it is) and commit it to God and it will produce much. In the *New Bible Commentary* D. A. Carson observed: "In multiplying the loaves and fish God did in one moment of time what he does every day with the corn (grain) in the fields and the fish in the sea. To us, it is a miracle; to Him, it is natural."

While this is a great comparison, we would be amiss if we did not acknowledge that there is a definite difference in fish in the sea and fried fish in a lunch box and there is a difference in grain growing in a field and grain that has been ground and baked into bread. The mustard seed, the live fish and the grain in the field have life in them and that miracle of reproduction is a result of the way they were created. The cooked fish and the bread had **no life** in them that would result in reproduction, yet in the hands of the Creator who is the giver of life, multiplication happened.

There are some obvious lessons here. When we are dead in trespasses and sins, then we are like the loaves and fish and we need new life in us to enable growth and to share this life with others. That new life is available **only** from the Creator of life and is what the **new birth** gives each person who has become part of the family of God.

One might be tempted to ask the question, have we been "multiplied" since we presented our loaf and fish to the Master? If the answer is "No," then might we assume that the reason is because we haven't been broken? It was when the loaves were broken and when the fish were divided that the miracle happened.

What happens when the compassion is limited to a humanistic world view or mind set? People may genuinely want to help others and because God is left out, they set out to do it in their own strength. It doesn't take long when dealing with material wealth and/or material resources that limitations are soon reached. If people or organizations reach their limits, they may seek outside help. For those who have rejected God, the usual place to which they turn is the government. One of the problems with Humanism is that the proponents of this world view believe that man is his own god OR that the "state" is god. The Romans had this problem in that they blatantly claimed that Caesar was (a) god. The USSR was an example of the state setting itself up as god. If the state is to act as if it is god, then those in control might try to do what Jesus did in multiplying the loaves and fish. However, they do not have the power of God to actually create or to infuse life; therefore, the best that can be done is to produce what would be the equivalent of photo copies of the loaves and fish. In actual practice, the government winds up just printing money to meet the overwhelming needs. Since there is no creative power for those who do not rely on or trust in God, then the outcome is not sustainable.

This miracle was done because of the need of the moment. It was not intended to just be a "show of power" but it was a clear demonstration that God can meet and provide for all of our physical needs. If we look beyond just the physical, it also shows us that He will provide the spiritual food for the purposes of feeding the hungry. We should look to him and not be eager to

send people off to the “marketplace” (psychologist, etc.) for help but rather submit the little we have to Jesus and in His hands the meager means become much.

Share the Gospel – 6:26-31

²⁶ Jesus answered them and said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. ²⁷ “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal.” ²⁸ Therefore they said to Him, “What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to Him, “What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?” ³¹ “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.’ ” John 6:26-31 (NASB95)

You would not be surprised to learn that the people who had experienced the benefits of the miracle of the previous day would be telling others what had happened. If someone told you that a particular store or warehouse in town was giving away food, then people would be lined up for miles to get some for themselves. Most people would not be concerned about how the store came by the food; they would be most concerned about getting their fair share or maybe even more. This was the “mind-set” of the people who sought out Jesus in Capernaum.

Jesus had their attention and He took the opportunity to try to put the news of the day into proper perspective. So many times we see the news on television or read about something on the internet or in the newspaper and we really don’t know the context in which the events happened or what is the significance. In our present-day situation of 24-hour news channels and thousands of blogs on the internet, we don’t have to go far to find analyses of the news by many different people. Many of those giving opinions and interpretations usually miss the main point and focus on the trivia and few go so far as to put the events into a larger overall perspective that embraces the historical and future significance of the present happenings. Jesus provided an analysis for these people of the events of which they were a part by giving them a perspective that they would have not discovered on their own.

Just the day before, Jesus had fed the crowd and they immediately wanted to make Him the king. They had missed the spiritual significance of what Jesus was teaching in this miracle. Just the small lunch the lad gave to Jesus was shared without being exhausted. In like manner, Jesus can be shared with all people and His provision of Himself will never be exhausted. Once again (as was the case with the woman at the well) Jesus redirected life’s focus to the spiritual rather than the physical.

The physical is limited and finite, but the spiritual is eternal and unlimited. Most of the efforts of most people are on things done to sustain physical life and little, if anything, is done that embraces and enhances spiritual and eternal life. The people in the crowd knew what kinds of activities would provide for physical food that sustained physical life, but they did not have any idea of what was needed to acquire the “food” that would result in eternal life. The answer to the question was probably NOT what they were expecting. Jesus essentially told them that they needed to put their trust in Him.

I suppose their response was predictable. “Why should we put our trust in You without proof that You are telling it like it is or simply “give us a sign or some proof?” What they wanted to see was something akin to the “manna from heaven” that their forefathers had seen. What they failed to realize was that they were looking at and talking with the very proof they wanted to experience. God incarnate and dwelling with mankind is the greatest proof one could possibly have.

Follow Through – 6:47-51

⁴⁷ “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ “I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ “Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ “This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” John 6:47-51 (NASB95)

The words Jesus used were carefully chosen when He said, "I AM the bread of life." He was identifying Himself with the One who had identified Himself to Moses at the burning bush as I AM THAT I AM. Jesus was essentially telling these people (and us) that He is the provider and sustainer of all life (spiritual and physical). They already had physical life. Spiritual life was (is) available to all who will come to Jesus and believe (put their trust in Him). Jesus recognized that not everyone would be willing to accept this truth.

Earlier in the conversation with the people, they had asked for a sign that would attest to Who Jesus was. They pointed to Moses and the manna as a sign that attested to the validity of his ministry. Jesus commented at that time, “Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but My father gives you the true bread from heaven.” He then returned to that theme and reminded them that their ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they are long since dead. The manna was a physical type pointing toward Jesus Who is the true spiritual bread that provides for eternal life.

Jesus was referring to the means by which He would serve as the life-giving Bread. The path would be the way of the cross in which He would be sacrificed as an atonement for our sins. He did that so the world might have life and not perish. It was a high price to pay; however, it has been paid and the Bread of Life is available to all who will come unto Him and believe. The real tragedy is not that Christ died, but that millions will go to Hell for all eternity because they did not eat of the Living Bread. Is there someone you know who needs to know Jesus?