

Matthew 14B

- One of the more frightening consequences of Israel's rejection of Jesus was the prospect of Jesus turning the Kingdom Program over to His disciples
 - Because those men were simply not ready to assume responsibility for the Church
 - None of the disciples were trained as ministers or rabbis
 - None had been seeking for that role, at least not before they met Jesus
 - And most importantly, none of them could possibly appreciate what would be required of them in service to the Kingdom
 - Nevertheless, that's the plan...hand over leadership of the Church to a fishermen, a tax collector, and a teenager
 - Now, obviously Jesus is head of the Church and by His Spirit He directs His church and every leader over it
 - And that's why it really didn't matter whether these guys were competent or not
 - In time, the Lord would make them equal to the challenge
 - As I say, the Lord call unqualified people to serve Him, but He won't leave them untrained
 - Therefore, one of the important themes in this section of Matthew is how the Lord prepares His disciples to serve Him in the Kingdom
 - Jesus will teach these men many things about ministry and about recruiting others to do the same
 - His work will be made all the more difficult because so much of what these men thought they knew about ministry was wrong
 - They grew up under Pharisaic Judaism, and so their training focused on the Mishnah and the rituals of Jewish life
 - Which lead to a very legalistic and unloving approach to ministry
- Now Jesus was going to turn all their experiences and training on its head by replacing it with an approach to ministry they had never seen before

- Today as we study this section of the Gospel, Jesus' lessons may not sound revolutionary, because we understand the Kingdom Program more or less
 - But remember, what you know of that Program came through the writing of these disciples in the New Testament
 - So they learned it first, and we learned it from them
 - The first day of their training began with perhaps Jesus' most extraordinary miracle

Matt. 14:13 Now when Jesus heard about John, He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself; and when the people heard of this, they followed Him on foot from the cities.

Matt. 14:14 When He went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick.

Matt. 14:15 When it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and the hour is already late; so send the crowds away, that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

- Matthew says that after Jesus heard of John's death, He withdrew from there
 - "There" refers to somewhere on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, but we don't know Jesus' exact departure point
 - We know He had just been in Nazareth
 - And we know that later when He returns, He walks back to Capernaum across the water
 - So perhaps He departed from Capernaum
 - In any case, the reason for His departure according to Matthew was at hearing of John's death
 - But Jesus takes this journey for more than just an opportunity to mourn over John privately
 - Jesus travels to perform the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand
 - We know this because we have the benefit of considerable context for this moment given in the other Gospels

- This miracle is unique in the New Testament, because it's the only one of Jesus' miracles reported in all four of the Gospels
 - Which tells us what an impression it made on all the disciples... truly this was a lesson none of them ever forgot
 - And because it's recorded in all four Gospels, we have a lot of background information to help us understand why it happened
- First, Mark tells us in Chapter 6 that Jesus and the disciples were exhausted from ministering to so many people

[Mark 6:31](#) And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.)

[Mark 6:32](#) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

- So the Lord told His disciples they would get away for a while to rest from the burdens of ministry
- That's why they chose to sail to the eastern side of the Galilee
- Earlier in Matthew I explained how the territory around the Sea of Galilee was divided into Jewish and Gentile regions
 - The Jews occupied the western side of the lake while the Gentiles occupied the eastern side
 - We last saw Jesus in this region when He visited Gerasa and freed the man in the tombs from the demons
 - Jesus ventured periodically into the Gentile region primarily to escape the Jewish crowds that pressed on Him 24/7
 - Jews rarely if ever ventured into the Gentile territory, so when Jesus went there by boat, the crowds wouldn't follow
- But this time Jesus chose to journey to a spot located on the border between the two regions
 - Luke tells us that the secluded place Jesus went was located near a small fishing village called Bethsaida
 - Bethsaida was the dividing point between Jew and Gentile communities on the northeastern corner of the lake

- Which meant the crowds were willing to follow Him this time
- Assuming Jesus departed from Capernaum, He sailed about 3-4 miles
 - Which means the crowds walked about 5 miles, which took about 2 hours, meaning they probably arrived shortly after Jesus
 - That wasn't much of a break for Jesus and the disciples, and it suggests Jesus wasn't trying to avoid the crowds entirely
 - He's working a different plan...He's preparing to teach His disciples a lesson
- We get confirmation from John's Gospel because John tells us this happens at Passover which is our final clue to explain why Jesus took this journey
 - Passover is a memorial of the Exodus, when Moses led a group of Jews through the Red Sea and into desolate territory without food or water
 - When they arrive, Moses ascends a mountain, leaving the people down below
 - Eventually the people required food, so Moses called down manna from Heaven and the people were fed miraculously
 - So now Jesus takes this journey so He can use these circumstances to establish a picture showing Himself as the fulfillment of the Passover
 - Like Moses, Jesus will cross a body of water to reach a desolate Gentile territory with a large crowd of Jews following behind
 - Jesus also retreats up a mountainside leaving the crowd gathered below
 - And when they seek for food, He will feed them miraculously with bread from Heaven
 - So Jesus made this journey to invite comparisons to the Exodus
 - Jesus orchestrates this experience like a living parable to show the people He is the bread of life come down from Heaven
 - And Jesus sets this scene to teach His disciples that they must come to Him for their supply in ministry
 - So knowing all these details, let's understand Jesus' lesson

- In v.14 we're told that Jesus sees the large crowd below and has compassion on them and healed their sick
 - This verse introduces an important caveat to my earlier explanation of how Jesus' ministry changed after His rejection
 - After His rejection by Israel, Jesus stops offering miracles for everyone who comes to Him
 - He now begins requiring faith as a prerequisite for healing
 - And we'll see this shift confirmed time and again throughout the second half of Matthew's gospel
 - But there will still be occasions when Jesus chooses to act against that pattern by healing large numbers of people
 - On occasion in times of great need as we have here, Jesus will have compassion for the people, we're told
 - And in those moments, He will act contrary to the general pattern by healing people without demanding faith
 - Those exceptions only serve to prove the rule
 - The statement "Jesus had compassion" will be Matthew's clue to us when Jesus is going against His normal practice
- And as evening approached, the disciples look upon the huge crowd and make the obvious conclusion that there is no way to feed so many
 - They are probably concerned about discontent or even riots, so in v.15 the disciples propose a way to solve the problem
 - They suggest that Jesus should make the crowds go into the nearby towns to buy food for themselves
 - Notice their choice of words: they say "send the crowds away..." which means order them to leave
 - Their thinking reflected the attitude of Pharisaic Judaism in that day
 - Putting it in my own words, the disciples were saying, "Look at all these people...they're so much trouble"
 - "They are a burden upon us...help us Jesus...tell them to stop being a burden and to go find their own food"

- Who were the disciples thinking about when they said those words?
 - At first it may sound as if they have concern for the people
 - But the truth was they only had concern for themselves
 - They were forgetting why the crowds were even there in the first place
- They had come hoping for Jesus to minister to them in one way or another
 - They did nothing wrong...they came with hope and desire and needs, and that's what all good ministry is founded upon
 - Nevertheless, the disciples could only see a crowd of people bringing burdens and getting in the way of Jesus' ministry
- Their attitude reminds me of those rude clerks who treat customers as if they are an intrusion or interruption in their day
 - The clerks should recognize we are the very reason they exist
 - It's because of the customer that a business is even in business
 - And it's because of the flock that shepherds have reason to shepherd
- A shepherd's heart doesn't hold a flock's weaknesses or needs – or even their mistakes – against them
 - Instead, shepherds recognize those weaknesses as the very reason we have opportunity to minister
 - In fact, did you know that the Bible teaches that the more needs exist in our body, the better it is for us?
 - Paul says it this way:

1Cor. 12:21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

1Cor. 12:22 On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary;

1Cor. 12:23 and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable,

[1Cor. 12:24](#) whereas our more presentable members have no need of it.

- Paul says those members of our corporate body that seem to be weaker than us are actually the most “necessary”
 - Weaker refers to brothers or sisters who are hard to love...the less spiritually mature, those who carry a lot of sin baggage
 - They may irritate us, or they always seem to say the wrong thing or do the wrong thing, or they have messy lives
- Paul says they are not problems to be sent away...they are necessary and they are due even greater honor
 - Receiving greater honor means receiving a greater share of ministry service within the body
 - It’s an honor to have someone minister to us, because they are investing self-sacrificially in our spiritual growth
 - And that investment will pay us dividends in eternity because it brings us into the Kingdom with greater opportunity for reward
- Those weaker members of the body are necessary, Paul says, because they give purpose to our spiritual gift
 - The weaker members in our body are our customers and we’re the clerk assigned to serve them spiritually
 - They aren’t a burden, they’re the reason we’re here...they are the ones who need our service the most
 - They may seem to be weaker, but they are actually God’s gift to us, and He will use them in our lives to teach us
 - In fact, we will gain far more from serving those weaker members than they receive from our service
- Because when you minister to people who have rough edges, you truly learn how to love someone the way Christ loves you: self-sacrificially
 - And I need to share a little secret...sometimes we’re the unlovable person with rough edges that others have to serve
 - So let’s all be grateful that Christ required his ministers be servants who lovingly care for those who bring burdens

- This is not how Pharisaic Judaism perceived their role as ministers to the people
 - A Pharisee saw his job this way: he said to himself, “I am the model Jew”
 - “I sacrifice, I study, I tithe, I devote endless hours to purity and holiness
 - “I’m God’s representative to the Jewish people”
 - “Just as men are blessed to receive God’s fellowship, so are the Jewish people privileged to receive my ministry”
 - “Just as the Lord receives praise and honor for His glory and wisdom, so should I receive praise and honor among the people”
- The Bible calls this attitude “lording” over people
 - The word lording means to exercise dominion over someone while expecting them to respond with homage and obedience
 - In speaking against this mentality, Jesus says this later

Matt. 20:25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.

Matt. 20:26 “It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,

Matt. 20:27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;

Matt. 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

- We will cover this passage in greater detail when we get there, but for today it’s easy enough to see Jesus’ point
 - Ministers are not to be lords over people but rather servants to the people
 - In fact, the Greek word translated as minister here is *diakonos*, which can also be translated slave
- So pastors, elders and other ministers are as slaves to God’s people, but it’s important to understand what Jesus meant
 - Jesus wasn’t suggesting to the flock that they have authority over their elders or pastors

- Nor does He mean that elders and pastor are supposed to do the bidding of the flock
- Jesus was addressing the Church's future leaders when He spoke those words
 - And He used the term slave to emphasize to leaders that they cannot adopt a haughty, self-serving attitude in ministry
 - Men (and women) who assume ministry positions in the body can't use our positions of authority to serve our interests
 - We must maintain an attitude of humility and sacrifice remembering we're here to serve *you*...not the other way around
- But these disciples grew up under Pharisaic Judaism, so they naturally saw the Pharisees as their ministry role models
 - So they assumed that being in Jesus' inner circle meant they would have a place of power and authority and privilege over the people
 - And you can detect that sense of entitlement in their response... tell the people to go find food for themselves
 - So Jesus teaches these men what ministry truly requires by giving them perhaps His most powerful example of ministry

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

Matt. 14:17 They said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

Matt. 14:18 And He said, "Bring them here to Me."

Matt. 14:19 Ordering the people to sit down on the grass, He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, He blessed the food, and breaking the loaves He gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds,

Matt. 14:20 and they all ate and were satisfied. They picked up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve full baskets.

Matt. 14:21 There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children.

- Jesus opens with an astonishing rebuke telling the disciples the people do not need to go away...*you* give them something to eat
 - A more literal translation of the original Greek would read, "They have no need to go away – you feed them!"

- Jesus puts the burden right back where it belongs: on the shepherds of this flock
- Now in fairness to the disciples, how could they have expected to feed so many people?
 - As we heard in v.21, there were thousands of people present that day
 - In fact, the disciples tell Jesus there were only five loaves and two fish available
 - In John's Gospel we learn that Peter's brother, Andrew, was the first to notice a young boy selling the loaves and fish
 - But just as quickly Andrew says they could not possibly satisfy the demand with so little
- But Jesus wasn't expecting them to come up with the solution by themselves... He was asking them to set their minds on ministry
 - If our first response to a ministry need or opportunity is to ask "how?", then we are doing ministry completely wrong
 - Our first question when considering any ministry opportunity should be "does the Lord desire for us to minister in this way?"
 - If the answer to that question is yes, then we move ahead in confidence that the Lord will direct us in the "how" over time
 - But if we begin every ministry effort with the question "how?", we will never do anything worthwhile for the Lord
 - Because ministry is fundamentally about doing things that are impossible, humanly-speaking
 - So when we try to answer the question "how" before accepting the challenge, we inevitably substitute our own plans for God's plan
 - Just as Andrew searched for a supply of food in a vain effort to find a human solution to the problem
 - When he couldn't find enough he threw his hands up and declared, I guess we can't minister to these people
 - Jesus didn't save us and call us into serving Him so that we could solve problems for Him

- He gives us ministry opportunities so He can solve problems through us...and in us
- Because as we obey Him and allow Him to do the heavy lifting, not only does the work get done but He also grows us
- And then the Lord rightly receives glory for both accomplishments
- The disciples were so focused on solving the problem in their own power that they forgot Jesus was standing next to them
 - So Jesus sets to work reminding them of how shepherds are supposed to work...shepherds feed sheep
 - The sheep aren't supposed to locate their own supply of food
 - If sheep were capable of feeding themselves, there would be little need for shepherds
 - So shepherds are supposed to feed sheep, but at the same time, shepherds aren't required to produce food for sheep
 - Shepherds don't cause the grass to grow on the hillside
 - Shepherds lead sheep to the places where the Lord has already prepared fields with grass
 - Likewise, we are not the source of another person's spiritual supply
 - We shepherd people by feeding them, yes, but our source comes from the Lord
 - We are conduits bringing the Lord's supply to the people
 - And the Lord orchestrates this well-known miracle to make that point clearly
- And notice, once Jesus set the disciples' minds on feeding the crowd, Jesus begins to show His disciples "how" to do it
 - First, Jesus instructs the people to sit in the grass
 - In Mark's Gospel we're told they sit in groups of hundreds and fifties, which simply means into small, manageable groups
 - We can easily imagine practical purposes in why Jesus asked them to sit down

- If hungry people see food coming their way, they tend to rush toward it to make sure they get a share
- Making them sit ensures orderliness and also imparts confidence that there is a plan to ensure everyone is fed
- But those practical reasons are not the main reason Jesus seats them down in grass
 - The main purpose relates back to Psalm 23
 - The Shepherd is the One Who causes His sheep to lie down in green pastures
 - The Shepherd cares for His sheep and makes sure they receive their rations
 - So Jesus' instructions were part of testifying that He is the Shepherd of Psalm 23, the One who cares for us
- Next, Jesus gives thanks for the food and the miracle that's about to follow, then He begins to break the bread and divide the fish out
 - Jesus then begins to distribute the food through the hands of the disciples
 - Jesus handed the food to each disciple who then carried it down the mountainside to the people in a basket
 - And as this process continued, the groups of people ate their fill, no one was left wanting
- You have to wonder what was going through the minds of the disciples as they moved up and down the mountain filling their baskets
 - They knew Jesus started with only a little food, but because they are acting as waiters, they aren't present to see the miracle
 - They can't see the food miraculously reappearing
 - They just return each time to Jesus, to have their baskets filled and go back down
- Jesus was teaching His disciples what serving Him in the Kingdom Program will be like every day
 - First, Jesus taught that He supplies miracles to His people through the hands of His servants

- That's why Jesus required each disciple returned to Jesus many times to refill their baskets
- If Jesus' priority had been efficiency, He would have walked down the mountainside and miraculously produced a buffet line
- He is intentionally distributing the food in an inefficient way, through the hands of His disciples, to make His point
- Secondly, each disciple's personal success in ministry depended on continually returning to the Lord so He could fill the basket
 - If the disciple returned, he had come back with something to offer the people
 - If he didn't return to Jesus, he would soon run out and have nothing and be useless to the people
- So not only were the disciples unable to find a solution on their own in the beginning, neither could they sustain the ministry once it began
 - Even after Jesus gave them a solution and the work began, they did not possess the power to perpetuate the work
 - Ministry always requires we abide in Jesus – the lesson of John 15
 - We go to Him to receive that which is valuable, and then we bring it back to the people one nugget at a time
- Thirdly, in the course of our service, the work we do in serving Christ won't seem like a miracle in the moment
 - Each time the disciple's basket was filled by Jesus, it didn't appear miraculous to that disciple
 - The sense we get from all four Gospels is that Jesus multiplied the food out of the sight of the disciples
 - They just saw Jesus putting food in their basket...a very ordinary moment
 - The miracle was that it happened over and over again
 - Likewise, when we serve someone in a moment with a prayer or a teaching or an encouraging word, it won't seem like a miracle took place

- But when we step back and see the cumulative effect of all those moments of service, we will see a miracle
- We will see a multitude the Lord fed through our hands, and Jesus will rightly receive the glory for it
- Fourthly, Jesus was teaching the disciples that ministry is hard work
 - How many times did they have to walk up and down that hillside that day?
 - Do you supposed that some of them might have been complaining under their breath?
 - Can you hear Peter suggesting to Jesus, “Why don’t You come down here so we don’t have to make this climb so much?”
- Ministry is hard work...and there are a lot of days when you wonder to yourself why am I doing this? There has to be an easier way to live
 - Serving Jesus in ministry is a great privilege, and generally speaking, it’s a joy
 - But there are times when it’s very lonely and difficult and gut wrenching just plain hard work
 - And if you aren’t prepared to give Christ your best effort and to endure the challenges, then don’t put your hand to the plow and look back
- Finally, there was one more lesson for the disciples and the people
 - After the crowd had been fed (which must have taken several hours), Jesus ordered the disciples to collect the excess food from the people
 - The Lord could have simply multiplied more food for each disciple
 - Instead, He insisted that the disciples’ food come from what had already been handed out to the people below
 - The Lord had literally given away the disciples’ food, and then He required disciples to go back to the people and ask for it back
 - I imagine some in the crowd probably wanted to keep those extras for themselves

- Which means the disciples probably had to do a little petitioning, a little begging, and a little fund raising so to speak
- The disciples' provision came in the form of excess given to the people, so they could be blessed by blessing those who served them
 - Notice that the amount collected was exactly twelve baskets, reflecting the 12 apostles who had served the people
 - Everyone is being blessed through the hands of someone else yet the supply is all from the Lord
- Matthew ends his account with a punchline: there were five thousand men in the crowd plus women and children beyond that
 - That number puts Jesus' miracle into perspective
 - Who among those disciples would have supposed in advance that they could find a way to feed so many people?
- But the number 5 in the Bible is the number of grace
 - And that's the fundamental difference between how Pharisees ministered and how Jesus wants us to minister
 - Our service to Christ begins and ends with grace
 - It begins by the grace of God in our salvation and our equipping and call into ministry
 - And then it continues in the way we minister to others, not holding their faults against them, not viewing their needs as unnecessary burdens
 - Rather we seek out the weak because they give us the blessed opportunity to serve in our spiritual gift
 - And we serve in grace that Jesus supplies to us, knowing we only have something valuable to offer someone else if we obtained it from Jesus
 - And we ourselves depend on the grace of God through your hands for our own supply
 - Think about the power and reach of a Christian community that truly lived out that style of grace-oriented ministry?
 - It would truly be a miracle