

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

Setting and Importance in Jesus' Ministry

According to Matthew, Jesus had a 3-part ministry: 1) Preaching the gospel of the kingdom saying, "Repent, for the kingdom is at hand;" 2) Teaching the law, primarily in the synagogues; and 3) Healing all as a proof of his Messiahship.

First, Israel rejected Jesus' preaching, by not repenting and by allowing Herod to incarcerate John the Baptist. "When John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? ... Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? ... A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. ... But whereunto shall I liken this generation? ... For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous. ... Then began he to upbraid the cities wherein most of his mighty works were done, because they repented not," Matt. 11:2-20.

Next, Israel rejected Jesus' teaching about the law, especially about the sabbath. Because Covenant Theology is dominant and spiritualizes the scriptures, teachers keep repeating that the Jews rejected Jesus because they were expecting a physical kingdom, but Jesus was offering a spiritual kingdom. This is unbiblical. The Bible doesn't say that. Jesus was offering Israel a physical kingdom, as prophesied and expected. The Bible repeatedly says the reason Israel rejected Jesus was because they disagreed with his teaching about the law, especially the sabbath (Matthew 12:1-14, Mark 2:23-3:6, and Luke 6:1-11). All three of these passages say the Pharisees were offended that Jesus' disciples

picked and ate raw grain on the sabbath, and then Jesus healed a man's withered hand in a synagogue on the sabbath. So:

Matt. 12:14. Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy him.

Mark 3:6. And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him.

Luke 6:11. And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus.

Finally, Israel rejected Jesus' healing and miracles by committing the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in Matthew 12:24-37 and Mark 3:22-30, by attributing Messiah's Spirit-wrought miracles to be the work of Satan. (Luke's reference to the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in Luke 12:10 as Jesus was traveling towards Jerusalem, was to the event that happened earlier chronologically, because the blasphemy had to happen before the parables of the kingdom of heaven judgment in Luke 8:4.)

The blasphemy against the Holy Ghost was a point-of-no-return, and the Pharisees that promoted that accusation were no longer able to believe on Messiah for forgiveness of sins and justification. Like those who will take the mark of the beast during the tribulation period, or like every person who dies, they had no more opportunity to be saved. We can't commit that sin, or even one like it, today! Even rejecting Jesus for salvation does not result in the loss of ability to change our minds and accept Jesus before we die. It usually becomes more difficult as a person gets older and more hardened, but it doesn't become impossible as it did for them. It was a judicial judgment that they would not be able to believe the rest of their lives.

As a result of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost, Jesus stopped teaching plainly about the law and started teaching in parables that the kingdom would be delayed. The same day Jesus announced the judgment of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost in a house in Galilee (Mark 3:19b, 23, 31), he went out and sat in a ship and taught the parables of the kingdom in Matt. 13, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:4-18.

Jesus also stopped healing “all” publicly and started healing only those who had faith and privately, either in a different location from the Pharisees, or off to the side in private. When Jesus went to Nazareth after the rejection, “He did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). “He could there do no mighty work ... because of their unbelief,” Mark 6:5-6. When he sent out the twelve, they “anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them,” Matt. 6:13 and “heal[ed] everywhere” (Luke 9:6), but they didn’t heal “all” as Jesus had before the rejection. “When the even was come ... he ... healed all that were sick,” Matt. 8:16. “At even ... they brought unto him all that were diseased,” Mark 1:32. “When the sun was setting, ... he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them,” Luke 4:40.

While the twelve apostles were announcing the kingdom and healing throughout the cities of Israel, Jesus went up to Jerusalem, probably at the feast of Purim with the ‘intention’ to stay until Passover thirty days later. He got the Pharisees to seek to kill him by healing a lame man at the pool of Bethesda on the sabbath, and then scandalized them by claiming to be the Son of God. He returned to Galilee because of their opposition. About this time John the Baptist was executed, and the twelve returned to Jesus just before Passover, and he took them up on a mountain by the Sea of Galilee to get away

from the crowds. But the crowds followed, and Jesus fed five thousand men with five loaves of bread.

This event is one of the few events recorded in all four gospels, and was the peak of Jesus' ministry to Israel. After seeing this miracle, the Galileans intended to make him king, but Jesus knew their faulty motives and evaded them. The next day in Capernaum, Jesus scandalized them and most of the wider circle of his disciples by teaching he is the bread of life that came down from heaven that everyone must eat to have eternal life.

The Pharisees and priests were primarily to blame for the failure to lead a national repentance, the rejection of Jesus teaching on the law, and the accusation that Jesus did his miracles by the power of Satan. Jerusalem had never been friendly to Jesus, from his first official appearance there when he cleansed the temple in John 2, and they asked by what authority he did those things. But now, the ministry in Galilee was gone also, so Jesus headed out of Israel to finish training the apostles.

First, he went into primarily Gentile territory in the plain of Gennesaret northeast of Capernaum and Bethsaida. Then to the primarily Gentile area of Tyre and Sidon to the northwest. Then to the primarily Gentile area of Decapolis to the southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Then he passed by Bethsaida, probably staying outside of town (Mark 8:26), on the way to Caesarea Philippi in the north, where he was transfigured on Mount Hermon (likely).

At this point, in place of the gospel of the kingdom being at hand, Jesus started announcing the gospel of the Messiah. Right after Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi: "Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples,

how that he must ... be killed, and be raised again the third day,” Matt. 16:20-21. “And he charged them that they should tell no man of him. And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must ... be killed, and after three days rise again,” Mark 9:30-31. “And he straitly charged them, and commanded them to tell no man that thing; saying, The Son of man must ... be slain, and be raised the third day,” Luke 9:21-22.

Right after the transfiguration at Mount Hermon, Jesus turned around and headed back to Galilee to go to Jerusalem to die. He “passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know it, for he taught his disciples,” Mark 9:30-31. In Capernaum, he got a coin from a fish’s mouth to pay his taxes. And then “he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem,” Luke 9:51.

Some Differences Between Gospel Accounts

MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN
<p>14:13 When Jesus heard of it [execution of John the Baptist], he departed thence by ship into a desert place apart: and when the people had heard thereof, they followed him on foot out of the cities.¹⁴ And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was <u>moved with compassion</u> toward them, and he <u>healed their sick</u>.¹⁵ And when it was evening, his <u>disciples came to him</u>, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals.¹⁶ But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; <u>give ye them to eat</u>.¹⁷ And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes.¹⁸ He said, Bring them hither to me.¹⁹ And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he <u>blessed</u>, and brake, and gave the loaves <u>to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude</u>.²⁰ And they did</p>	<p>6:30 And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught.³¹ And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and <u>rest a while</u>: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.³² And they departed into a desert place by ship privately.³³ And the people saw them departing, and many knew him, and <u>ran afoot</u> thither out of all cities, and <u>outwent them</u>, and came together unto him.³⁴ And Jesus, <u>when he came out, saw much people</u>, and was <u>moved with compassion</u> toward them, <u>because they were as sheep not having a shepherd</u>: and he began to <u>teach them</u> many things.³⁵ And when the day was now far spent, his <u>disciples came unto him</u>, and said, This is a desert place, and now the time is far passed.³⁶ Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat.³⁷ He answered and said unto them, <u>Give ye them to eat</u>. And they say unto him, Shall we go and buy <u>two hundred pennyworth</u> of bread, and give them to eat?³⁸ He saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? go and see. And when they knew, they say, Five, and two fishes.³⁹ And he commanded them to make all sit down by companies upon the <u>green grass</u>.⁴⁰ And they <u>sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties</u>.⁴¹ And when he had taken the five loaves</p>	<p>9:10 And the apostles, when they were returned, told him all that they had done. And he took them, and went aside privately into a desert place <u>belonging to the city called Bethsaida</u>.¹¹ And the people, when they knew it, followed him: and <u>he received them</u>, and <u>spake unto them of the kingdom of God</u>, and <u>healed them</u> that had need of healing.¹² And when the day began to wear away, then <u>came the twelve</u>, and said unto him, Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and <u>lodge</u>, and get victuals: for we are here in a desert place.¹³ But he said unto them, <u>Give ye them to eat</u>. And they said, We have no more but five loaves and two fishes; except we should go and buy meat for all this people.¹⁴ For they were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, Make them <u>sit down by fifties</u> in a company.¹⁵ And they did so, and made them all sit down.¹⁶ Then he took the five</p>	<p>5:46 [In Jerusalem after healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda on the sabbath and then claiming to be the Son of God] For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me.⁴⁷ But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words? 6:1 After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias.² And a great multitude followed him, <u>because they saw his miracles</u> which he did on them that were diseased.³ And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples.⁴ And the <u>passover</u>, a feast of the Jews, was nigh.⁵ When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and <u>saw a great company come unto him</u>, he saith unto <u>Philip</u>, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?⁶ And this he said <u>to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do</u>.⁷ Philip answered him, <u>Two hundred pennyworth</u> of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little.⁸ One of his disciples, <u>Andrew</u>, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him,⁹ There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many?¹⁰ And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was <u>much grass</u> in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand.¹¹ And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had <u>given thanks</u>, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would.¹² When they were <u>filled</u>, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that <u>nothing be lost</u>.¹³ Therefore they gathered them together, and filled <u>twelve</u> baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which <u>remained</u> over and</p>

<p><u>all</u> eat, and were <u>filled</u>: and they took up of the fragments that <u>remained twelve baskets</u> full.²¹ And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, <u>beside women and children</u>.</p>	<p>and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and <u>blessed</u>, and brake the loaves, and gave them <u>to his disciples to set before them</u>; and the two fishes divided he among them all.⁴² And they did <u>all</u> eat, and were <u>filled</u>.⁴³ And they took up <u>twelve baskets</u> full of the fragments, and of the fishes.⁴⁴ And they that did eat of the loaves were about five thousand men.</p>	<p>loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he <u>blessed</u> them, and brake, and <u>gave to the disciples to set before the multitude</u>.¹⁷ And they did eat, and were <u>all filled</u>: and there was taken up of fragments that remained to them <u>twelve baskets</u>.</p>	<p>above unto them that had eaten.¹⁴ Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that <u>prophet</u> that should come into the world.¹⁵ When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and <u>take him by force, to make him a king</u>, he departed again into a mountain himself alone. 7:1 After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for <u>he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him</u>.</p>
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1) What was the reason for going up on the mountain? Matthew implies Jesus went because he was saddened by the death of John the Baptist, probably not only for what John suffered, but for its indication of the nation’s irreversible rejection of Messiah, and the thoughts of his own upcoming death. (Per John, it would be one year later, from Passover to Passover.) Mark implies the reason for going on the mountain was to give the apostles some rest away from the crowds after they returned from having been sent out two-by-two through all Israel. Luke doesn’t give much explanation, but he may hint it’s for the apostles’ sake, since he says Jesus “took them” (Luke 9:10). John gives the reason why Jesus didn’t go to Jerusalem for that last Passover before his death a year later at the end of the passage. “Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him,” John 7:1.

2) Who recognized the food shortage problem, and how was the solution was arrived at? All three synoptic accounts say the disciples came to Jesus and pointed out the problem. Then Jesus tells them to feed the crowd before he provides a solution. The phrase found in all three accounts, “Give ye them to eat,” implies this is part of their training; but only John explicitly says Jesus approach was “to prove him [Philip]” John 6:6. Also, only John names Philip and Andrew as the apostles Jesus interacted with about this.

In John, it's Jesus who raises the food issue, as the all-knowing, Son of God. "He himself knew what he would do," John 6:6. In John, the situation was not only foreseen, but desirable – if Jesus couldn't go to a crowded Jerusalem for the Passover without prematurely escalating the opposition of the religious rulers, he would have a Passover celebration on the mountain with his disciples and this large crowd. The Passover Lamb of God himself was present, and his broken body and blood one year later would provide the actual life-saving merit the Passover lambs have always symbolizing.

In Mark, the people "ran afoot ... and outwent them; ... and Jesus, when he came out, saw much people" (Mark 6:33-34) already waiting for him. But in John, Jesus is in control, sitting ready and expectant, as he looked up and "saw a great company come unto him" (John 6:5). This "coming" is also important, because in John this miracle is a "sign", and Jesus explains it's meaning in the discourse about the bread of life the next day in Capernaum. He will explain the rejection of the Messiah, because "No man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44); but he will also say, that while no man can come, all men can believe: "Every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life. ... Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life," John 6:40-47. Everyone who believes, who eats the bread of life, becomes one with Messiah. "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him," John 6:56. And the Father intimately foreknew from before the foundation of the earth all who would ever be one in his eternal Son, and predestined them to come to Messiah.

The feeding of the five thousand is both the high point, and an obviously inadequate high point, in Jesus' ministry to Israel. The men who witnessed it concluded

Jesus was “that prophet” (John 6:14), but they didn’t conclude he was Messiah. And they wanted him as king, but intended to “come and take him by force to make him a king” (John 6:15), instead of submitting to his authority over them. They were not hungering and thirsting after righteousness, as Peter evidenced he was, when he proclaimed at the end of the chapter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:68-69).

Some Miscellaneous Observations in No Particular Order

The Feeding of the Five Thousand in the Gospels			
Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Compassion	Compassion		
Healing		Healing	
	Sheep without a shepherd		
		Lodging problem	
	Teaching	Preaching the Kingdom	
	Two hundred pennyworth		Two hundred pennyworth
	Grass		Grass
	Hundreds and fifties	Fifties	
Women and children			
Blessed the bread	Blessed the bread	Blessed the bread	Blessed the bread (gave thanks)
Jesus > Disciples > Men	Jesus > Disciples > Men	Jesus > Disciples > Men	Jesus > Disciples > Men
All filled	All filled	All filled	Filled
Twelve baskets left	Twelve baskets left	Twelve baskets left	Twelve baskets left

It was easy to accurately tell how many men were fed (versus guesstimating) since they were sitting in ranks of hundreds and fifties. They were seated in groups of fifty men with families, not groups of fifty people, and the men distributed to their own families; or you wouldn’t be able to count the groups to know there were about 5000 men fed. Jesus not only knew how much bread to create so everyone would be filled, but how much they would eat so there would be exactly twelve baskets leftover. Only Luke mentioned the issue of lodging, but the crowds were commendable to stay overnight on the mountain and then hire shipping to Capernaum the next morning; they truly “labour[ed] ... for the

meat which perisheth,” John 6:27. The twelve baskets of “remnants” probably represented the believing Jewish remnant among the twelve tribes, which John says Jesus insisted all be gathered so “nothing be lost” (6:10); as he also assures in the following discourse, “this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (John 6:39). Although Matthew didn't move this miracle to his section on miracles in chapters 8-10, I'm sure he wouldn't object to the observation that since Jesus could create endless amounts of food at will, it also proved he was able to set up the Messianic Kingdom where there will be no hunger (although he already showed that by demonstrating his ability to control the weather).

Some Practical Applications for Today

Besides some of the doctrinal applications mentioned above:

Jesus is the bread of life that sustains us unto eternal life. We ought to look beyond the fact that Jesus can provide physical bread, to the fact of his power in general, and that he alone can satisfy every soul that hungers and thirsts after God.

As the Father gave his authority to the Son, so the Son gave provisions to the apostles, to give to the men, to give to their families. God uses vessels of clay like us in his service to others, and men are responsible to lead their families.

It's a good practice for us to give thanks for food before each meal, and ideally it will help us get in the habit of giving thanks for all things throughout the day, and not just for food at mealtime.