

MEETING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE



We can be so cruel towards our fellow human beings. While we as Christians are quick to say that we love people because God loves us, a lot of it remains just this – saying. There are no deeds to back up our words.

Jesus's disciples were no different, when they had every reason to be different. Here we have people who by all accounts were believers. They walked with Him, spent hours with Him, saw Him walk on the water. So, they knew what it was to live in faith. But even they failed to show the love we need to put into action.

Mark's gospel tells of the first instance where a small bit of food was increased to feed multitudes. Matthew also records the same events, but there are some minor details he includes that Mark does not. See Matthew 14:14ff. Read the two versions of the same account together.

When the day was now far spent, His disciples came to Him and said: This is a deserted place, and already the hour is late. Send them away, that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves bread; for they have nothing to eat. But He answered and said to them: You give them something to eat. – **Mark 6:35-37**

Matthew adds this: "They do not need to go away". So, the full version will read: "They do not need to go away," Jesus replied. "You give them something to eat." The difference is subtle but somehow Matthew describes slightly more compassion for the plight of the hungry masses than Mark.

Read from Mark 6:30 and see just what is happening here. Both Jesus and the disciples were tired (v30) so He suggests that they go and rest because they were so busy with the multitudes that they themselves had not even eaten. However, the multitudes kept following Jesus (v33).

He gets out of the boat, sees the crowd, and feels compassion for them (v34). The disciples see the same crowd, but look at their reaction:

- The place is desolate (v35)
- It is late already (v35)
- Send them away (v36)
- So that they can go into the neighbourhoods (v36)
- And buy food for themselves (v36)

The disciples use several excuses not to help the multitudes. For them, if they can get rid of the needy, they can get rid of the need.

Now look at Jesus' reaction:

- You give them something to eat! (v37)

Jesus gives them just one answer: you feed them! The disciples immediately have an excuse ready, not to help the multitudes, and their response to the Master's order is quite sarcastic: Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat? (v37). This is a rhetorical question. Of course Jesus does not expect them to go and buy food, but their reason for not wanting to do so is the same situation they want to subject the multitudes to – it is late, the place is desolate, and we are tired. They look at the cost. Two hundred denarii was a lot of money. They just see the reasons not to act. In fact, they cannot see that spending this amount of money on these people could make any economic sense.

Jesus asks them how much bread they have with them. Their answer is rather abrupt. No matter which English translation you read, the answer is rude: Five, and two fish (v38).

He does not expect them to do the extraordinary. That is for Him to do. But he does ask that they at least start with themselves. Do not tell God you cannot do something because you do not have what He could provide more of in the future. Use what you have right now, no matter how little it is.

Jesus takes the matter into His own hands. The very people that He taught to show compassion to others, are the ones who are utterly passive and cannot even organise a simple event. So, Jesus Himself **tells** the crowd to sit down (v39), **organises** them (v40), **takes** the bread and fish (v41), **looks** up to heaven, **thanks** God for supplying it, **breaks** the bread, and **gives** it to the disciples. All the disciples must do is to distribute the food. He was one person, performing no less than seven consecutive actions. Between the twelve of them, they do just one thing.

Do you see the action verbs here? Jesus acts when others are complacent. He puts words into action. Jesus gives abundantly. Look how much food was left over. He could have meticulously calculated how much they needed just to satisfy the immediate need, but they ate, and they were filled.

Another difference in the accounts of Matthew and Mark is found in verse 44. Mark states that the number fed was 5000, counting the men. Matthew, in verse 21 of his account, states that there were 5000 men fed, excluding the women and children. Now it is unlikely that the men ate, and the rest did not, and so the number fed was way more than 5000.

His actions do not stop here. He forces the disciples to go ahead and sail over to Bethsaida (v45) while He remains to personally send off the crowd (v46). We would think, OK, enough now, the crowds have been fed. Let us go to sleep. He goes to the mountain to pray (v46).

This must have been a very hard lesson for the disciples. They were humiliated, in a way, for their failure to respond to a very basic need – hunger. It takes another miracle, Him walking on the water, before He joins the disciples. Only once He is in the boat with them, calm is restored (v51). Mark does not tell us that this is also the incident where Peter walked on the water, but it is recorded in Matthew 14:28-31. How many miracles more do we need to understand Jesus' compassion for people? He feeds the masses, helps the disciples during the storm, gets Peter to walk on the water and calms the storm. They were amazed (v51).

What should set apart committed Christians from the rest is our readiness to respond to the needs of others, even when we look at what we have and think that it is not enough. God will provide more than what is needed.