

Our compassionate shepherd

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[0 : 00] The feeding of the 5,000 has got to be up there in any top ten of Bible stories.

We love the story. We're so familiar with it, and we've been familiar with it, perhaps many of us, from a very early age. We love the small child, the boy with his picnic lunch, becoming such an important character in the account. Mark doesn't speak of him specifically, but we know of him from John's account of the same occasion. We love the food and the quantity of it.

We love the miracle. The sheer scale of it all impresses us, and we're left very enamored by this account. And of course, capping it all, for those of us who as believers have been brought to convictions concerning the reliability of God's Word, the best part of it is that we know that it's true. It's not just a nice story that somebody made up and we can draw moral lessons from. No, this really happened, and it's a great story to tell and to consider and to be reminded of.

But what's the best part of the story? What is at the very heart of this so familiar miracle? Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think the whole account is grounded in and revolves around five simple words that Mark records for us or that Mark uses in explanation. And they are these words spoken concerning Jesus. He had compassion on them. I think this is at the very heart of this miracle, at the very heart of all that we're told about what happened on that day in the wilderness of Galilee.

He had compassion on them. And the passage before us is rich in revealing the depth and breadth and quality of the compassion of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He presents himself here, certainly is understood by those who witness the event, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight. They see Jesus here presenting himself as that Good Shepherd who can provide for sheep without a shepherd. And so we have revealed to us the deep compassion of the Good Shepherd. And this matters. It matters for you, and it matters for me today. For we all stand in need of compassion, and we are all called to show compassion to others.

[3 : 10] And so I wanted to spend some time thinking about this matter, the compassion of the Good Shepherd, to consider our compassionate shepherd. And we can think about different aspects of his compassion as they are before us, and as we are able to identify them in the passage that we are giving thought to.

We're going to begin by thinking about who the Good Shepherd has compassion on. Who are the objects of the shepherd's compassion? Well, Mark tells us. He gives us the answer to that question. We read that in verse 34, when Jesus landed. Remember that he was heading to a solitary place. There's almost an element of humor, certainly irony, that here he is looking for a solitary place, and lo and behold, there's 5,000 men, and how many more women and children? We don't know. But he lands at this so-called solitary place, and he saw a large crowd. He had compassion on them. The objects of Jesus' compassion are identified very clearly by Mark. They are this large crowd. I want us to just ponder for a moment, pause for a moment, and ask the question, what is it about this crowd that awakens the compassion of Jesus?

There's nothing to suggest that there was anything particularly needy about this crowd in distinction to any other crowd that could have gathered in Galilee or in Palestine on this occasion. I imagine that most of the crowd were fit and healthy. All evangelists focus on there being 5,000 men, and we don't know who there was in addition to these men, but it's maybe significant that there is this very explicit reference to there being 5,000 men. We'll come to that in a moment, but I'm sure most of them were fit and healthy young men. They are people who at the end of the day would return to their homes and their families and their ordinary lives, no doubt for many of them, quite happy lives, just regular men. We're not talking about a gathering of refugees or lepers or starving hordes.

They're not even malnourished. In fact, probably most of them aren't even hungry when we're told that Jesus had compassion on them. Several hours later, they were hungry, but when Jesus has compassion on them, they're not even hungry, which often is the very focus of the story, how hungry they were and they need to be fed. What then can we say of this crowd that explains the compassion of Jesus? What is it that they needed that Jesus was able to identify and so he has provoked to compassion? He has moved to compassion. I think at the very heart of what they needed, what they lacked, his direction. They were in need of direction. Mark tells us that they were like sheep without a shepherd, and that pastoral image of a sheep and shepherd often conjures up in our minds very much the idea of people in need of care, of protection, and that is part of the picture, but it's not the principle truth that is being portrayed. The picture that we have of a sheep in need of a shepherd is principally a picture of men and women in need of leadership, in need of direction, in need of somebody who would show them where they need to go and what they need to do.

As we think about this need of the crowd, this need for direction, it's interesting, intriguing, how some argue that this crowd was characterized particularly by being a crowd intent on insurrection, that these were zealous Galileans, and that's where some people focus on this emphasis of it being 5,000 men.

[7 : 45] That it was principally a male gathering. Of course, there were, no doubt, women and children, but principally these were 5,000 probably young, fit men. It's a huge gathering. Capernaum, where Jesus made his base during his public ministry, it is estimated, would have had a population of 2,000 or 3,000 people, and here we have 5,000 men. It's not surprising that we're told that they gathered from many towns and villages. It would need to be able to gather such a huge crowd. And it would seem that these were zealous Galileans looking for a king, looking for a commander, looking for a leader. And we're not just speculating when we say that. John, in his account of this occasion, makes this point very explicitly in John chapter 6 and in verse 15. This is John's account, and at the very end of it, we read, Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king, by force withdrew again to a mountain by himself. So, there very clearly were told that this was the intention certainly of many in the crowd.

They were in need of direction. They were looking for a leader. They were looking to liberate their people, but they didn't know how to do it and who to turn to. They didn't realize the kind of leader that they needed, but they were in need of a leader. They were in need of direction. They needed a Messiah. And Jesus was able to see this, and he had compassion on these men, full of zeal, maybe admirable zeal for their nation, but without a clue as to what to do and where to go.

Now, our circumstances, of course, are very different to these young Galileans who were fed by Jesus on this occasion, but this is very much a part, an integral part of the human condition that we need direction. We need one who will lead us and guide us in the way that we should go.

We often are clueless. We wander hither and thither without any sense of direction, and Jesus has compassion on such. But what else can we say about this crowd? I think this is the principle element. But they were also in need of sustenance. They needed spiritual and physical sustenance. They want Jesus to be their king, but they know next to nothing about his kingdom and the demands of kingdom citizenship. They need to be taught, and that is what Jesus does, and we'll come to that, the way in which Jesus expresses his compassion. He teaches them. He provides them with that sustenance for their mind and soul. And of course, as the incident plays out in due course, they also stand in need of physical sustenance, of being fed. It's not their principal need, but it was a need, and a need that Jesus gladly meets. Well, again, our circumstances are very different, but in this regard, we're not so different to these men and women who gathered on this occasion.

We stand in need of one who will teach us concerning God's kingdom and the demands and the privileges of kingdom citizenship. We need to be sustained in mind and body and soul.

[11 : 30] And when Jesus sees us in our need, he has compassion on us, even when we perhaps are often oblivious to the gravity of our need. But then also, for some who gathered on that occasion, they were in need of healing. Now, Mark says nothing of healing, but Matthew does acknowledge that Jesus on this occasion healed their sick. How many were in need of healing, we don't know. If this was, as we're told, a remote place that involved considerable physical endeavor even to be there, you would anticipate that most there were healthy. But there were those who were unwell. There were those in need of healing.

There would have been those who had been brought by friends and family members, knowing that Jesus was one who could help them. And so, there were those there in need of healing.

Jesus, of course, acknowledges and has compassion on those who have physical needs to be healed. But Jesus sees beyond their physical health to their spiritual health. Because these men, each and every one of them, like the rest of us, were sin-sick human beings in need of cleansing and forgiveness, that which Jesus is able to provide for them.

We can say that about those upon whom Jesus showed his compassion, those who awoke in Jesus his compassion. But let's move on and think a little bit about the nature of the shepherd's compassion, the nature of Jesus' compassion. What features can we identify? What kind of compassion do we witness in Jesus? Well, the first thing I would say is that it was very broad. It was, we're told, a large crowd.

It was so large that the best the disciples can do is estimate the total number. Each of the evangelists agrees on the figure of 5,000 men. Now, that clearly is a round figure, 5,000. The disciples don't know exactly how many men are there. They don't know exactly how many women and children accompanied them, but about 5,000 men and others. It was a large crowd. And the disciples saw it as that, a crowd.

[14 : 06] They couldn't see it in any other way. They didn't have the capacity to see beyond this being one big crowd. But what about Jesus? What did Jesus see when he saw this mass of humanity in this curiously named solitary place? What did he see? Well, Jesus saw the crowd, but he saw each and every man, woman, and child present that morning and throughout that day. There was a breadth to his compassion that was capable of encompassing even such a huge gathering. Now, that kind of compassion is beyond us.

We simply are not able to show that kind of compassion to that number of people. We hear people speak of people having, and it's a good thing if it's true, to speak of somebody having a big heart.

Say, oh, that person's got a big heart. But I can guarantee you that there's nobody with a big enough heart to have compassion, this kind of compassion on 5,000 people. I've never come across that big a heart.

I certainly don't have a heart that even approximates to that size. But in the case of Jesus, he does. He has compassion on this huge gathering of men, women, and children. And this is good news. To recognize and to identify that this is so, this is good news. That the compassion of Jesus is big enough to extend to such large numbers. It's good news for you. How many times people feel vulnerable and marginalized and ignored precisely because they're one of a multitude?

I'm nothing in this great multitude. What do I matter? What value do I have when there are so many? How can anybody be concerned for me? And here we discover that there is one whose compassion is big enough to include you. It's broad. But his compassion also could be described as deep. The very word that Mark uses here when he speaks of Jesus having compassion or being moved to compassion is a word that speaks of or points to the depth of that compassion. We think of one other occasion when that same word is used again in describing Jesus meets with one in great need. In Luke chapter 7, when we have the account of Jesus raising the widow's son, and the widow has lost her only son. And the encounter is described for us. And in verse 13 of chapter 7, we read that when the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, his heart went out to her. It's the same word. His heart went out to her. He was moved with compassion at her pain, at her plight, at her loss. This is a deep compassion.

[17 : 37] If we had to measure it, and of course we can't measure it, but perhaps we could attempt to measure it in this way. Maybe that helps a little. See, we don't see our own need, never mind the need of others.

That in itself limits our capacity for compassion because we don't even appreciate the depth of the pain that others are going through. We don't see it. We don't sense it. We can't see the heart.

But Jesus' compassion is proportional to his insight, and he sees the heart. He sees the pain. He knows the depths that we are in and the need that we are confronted with. This is deep compassion. And Jesus, the compassion of Jesus, or the compassionate Jesus, meets you at the very point of your deepest need.

So it is broad. It is deep. There's also a sense in which what we have presented to us here is a compassion that is unique or incompatible. Again, when we think of the word that Mark uses, it's a word that is employed in the Gospels only of Jesus or by Jesus. It's not that it's a word that couldn't be used to describe a man or woman. It could be. But there does seem to be a deliberate intention to use the word in such a way that it distinguishes Jesus from others. Others, of course, are capable of compassion. If we were wishing to be generous, indeed not very generous, but somewhat generous, we could say even the disciples on this occasion showed some compassion. That's why they were saying to Jesus, send them away so that they can buy food. Of course, they didn't conceive that there was an answer there before them. They're concerned for the crowd. There's some compassion in the disciples, but not this kind of compassion. The compassion of Jesus is presented to us as, in a very real way, unique and incomparable. We could say that it is divine in character, hence why it is distinguished.

The very word that is used here of Jesus is the word that Jesus uses in His parable of the prodigal son in describing the Father. There isn't perhaps a more emotive scene in the Scriptures presented for us than the Father waiting for His Son to return. And when He sees His Son coming from the distance, He rushes towards Him and embraces Him. Well, as Jesus told that parable, when He described the Father, He describes Him in this way, that He was moved with compassion by His Son and His circumstances and His plight.

[20 : 49] So that's something that we can draw out concerning the nature of the compassion of Jesus. But moving on to what we're calling the expression of the shepherd's compassion, what does Jesus do to demonstrate His compassion? Well, what Jesus does, compassion we tend to think of as an emotion. It's a feeling that we have. But of course, true compassion, genuine compassion, will always evidence itself in action, and that's what we're concerned about here. What does Jesus actually do that demonstrates that He is indeed moved with compassion? Well, what He does mirrors the people's need. We've identified what the need was. Well, what Jesus does is in response to that need. And so there's a symmetry there.

They were in need of direction. And so what does Jesus do? Well, He gives them direction. He leads them. As I commented a few moments ago, the picture of a shepherd is used in the Old Testament not principally to convey the idea of care and protection, though that is part of the picture, but rather a picture of leadership and direction. Let me just give one example of that. There are more, but let me just limit myself to one example. When in Numbers chapter 27, we're told of Joshua becoming the leader to replace Moses, the leader of God's people. And notice what is said in that context. Matthew 27, reading from verse 15.

Moses said to the Lord, May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them. One who will lead them and bring them in so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd. Moses is asking for one to replace him. And of course, Joshua has provided.

But notice that as a shepherd, pictured as a shepherd, his principal function is to lead the people. It's to give direction to the people. And that is what the people need. And that is what Jesus provides. But how does he do that? How does Jesus lead the people there gathered in their thousands? Well, it's interesting how he does it. He does it by teaching them. That's exactly what we're told. And it's quite dramatic how immediately after having been told that he has compassion on them, immediately after being told that they were like sheep without a shepherd. What are we then told? Then in verse 34, So he began teaching them. They're like sheep without a shepherd. What do they need? They need to be taught. It doesn't sound very dramatic, does it? To be taught. But that is the way in which Jesus leads them. That is the way in which he provides them the direction that they are in such need of. He teaches them. Jesus was a king whose leadership was not exercised by the sword, but by the word. His kingdom was established not by might, but by instruction. In Luke's account of this occasion, we're told that he taught them concerning the kingdom of God. These men wanted to be part of a royal army.

They wanted a kingdom to be established. And Jesus taught them about a kingdom. Very different to the kingdom they had in mind. But they needed direction. They needed to be taught. This is the kingdom that God is establishing now for you. He leads them by his actions. Jesus also is reminding us or presenting himself as the one who fulfills God's promise to be himself a shepherd for his people. Remember how through the prophet Ezekiel God made that promise to his people that there was a day coming when he himself would exercise that role of shepherd for his people. In Ezekiel 34, reading from verse 11, we read, For this is what the sovereign Lord says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. And the prophecy goes on. And here Jesus is taking upon himself this mantle of a shepherd for God's people.

[25 : 43] So how does he express his compassion? Well, he does so by leading them, by teaching them, by feeding them. He feeds their minds as he teaches them. He feeds their souls. He feeds their bodies.

But there is this very clear priority given by Jesus to teaching the multitude. He also heals those who are in need of healing. We've noticed already how Matthew acknowledges that part of what he did that day was to heal their sick. But of course, the healing provided by the shepherd goes deeper.

We know that in time, the passage before us doesn't speak of this, but in time, this shepherd would lay down his life for his sheep, that his sheep might experience spiritual healing and new life.

This was a future act of sacrifice on the part of this shepherd, his ultimate act of servant leadership.

And though it's not to the fore in this passage, it is interesting that the meal that Jesus presides over here in the wilderness is one in which we can see parallels with a subsequent meal with his disciples on the very eve of his death. In verse 41, when we have presented to us what Jesus did as he multiplied the loaves and the fish, and we read there in verse 41 of Mark chapter 6, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves, then he gave them to his disciples, and so on. And the parallels, indeed, the very verbs that are used there are the verbs that we find replicated when subsequently in this same gospel, we read of another meal where Jesus presided in Mark chapter 14. In verse 22, we read, while they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it and gave it to his disciples. The very four actions are exactly the same. And it may well be that this occasion in the wilderness was looking forward to that meal, a meal that was enjoyed on the eve of his death, as the good shepherd would give his life for his sheep, that they might know spiritual healing and new life. But moving on, let's just notice the resources employed by our compassionate shepherd. Jesus is not constrained by resources, but he does choose to employ resources outside of himself. What resources does he employ? Well, maybe this is often where we focus our attention when we think about this story. We think of the five loaves and the two fish. And of course, the manner in which Jesus uses these five loaves and two fish is full of spiritual counsel for us. The disciples see what they don't have. And Jesus urges them to see and acknowledge what they do have. The disciples are of a mind to hold back and to keep on to the little that they've got and to send the people away. And Jesus urges them to give everything they have, however seemingly poultry, to give them, to put them at the disposal of Jesus, that he might multiply what they have many thousandfold. He uses this poultry meal. But of course, he also uses the disciples. They're employed in the performing of the miracle. They are the ones who receive the bread and the fish as it is multiplied and distributed to the gathered hordes. They're very much part of what is going on. And

[29 : 39] Jesus uses these disciples, these unbelieving disciples. We call them unbelieving disciples. Of course, in a very real sense, they were believers. They were disciples. They had put their trust in Jesus. Their understanding of who he was was evolving. It was still inadequate, but they were disciples. They did believe in Jesus. And yet they were unbelievers in the sense that they didn't conceive of the possibility that these five loaves and two fish could possibly feed the gathered hordes.

So we can describe them as unbelieving believers, strange as that description might sound. But though it may sound strange, isn't that such a good description often of ourselves? We are believers.

By the grace of God, we've been brought to see Jesus for who he is, our Savior, the one who died for us, the one who can provide us with the direction and the sustenance that we need. And we've put our trust in him. And by God's grace, we are believers, and yet often unbelieving believers. When we're faced with a challenge, when we're faced with them, we say, well, that's impossible. I can't do that. We can't do that.

Just like these disciples. But it's interesting what the disciples do, even in the midst of their unbelief, and that is commendable and exemplary, and that is they obey. They don't believe that it's possible to feed all of these people. But when Jesus says what they have to do, they do it. He says, go and find out what you've got. They go and find out. He says, distribute. Divide the people in groups of 50 and 100, they do it. And so even in the midst of their unbelief, it's maybe battling with the possibility of belief, but what they do is they obey. And that surely is of challenge to us.

But then, of course, Jesus also has a far greater resource, if indeed we can use that word, that he turns to, and that is his own heavenly Father. He prays. I don't think that Jesus is praying, asking for a miracle, but rather he is thanking his Father for the provision. It's very possible that Jesus, on this occasion, though we're not told the words of his prayer, it's possible that he would have used the words that were commonly used at that time by the head of a Jewish home as he presided over a family meal. And the prayer, the grace that would ordinarily have been used would have been this one. Praise be to you, O Lord our God, King of the world, who makes bread to come forth from the earth and who provides for all that you have created. And if indeed these were the words that Jesus pronounced, how fitting. He who makes bread come out from the earth. That's what the crowd must have thought. Where did all this bread come from? Well, it came out of the earth, provided by the God who provides for all that he has created. Well, let's just notice finally, as we draw things to a close, the outcome of the shepherd's compassion, and very particularly focusing on words that we find there at the end of the account in verse 42, they all ate and were satisfied. Two words there just to think about for a moment. All and satisfied. They all ate. If we doubted that Jesus had compassion on all of those gathered on that day, surely any such doubt would be dispelled by the evidence of the outcome. If we were to say, well, he couldn't possibly have had compassion on all of them, well,

[33 : 30] I say this to you, he fed them all. They all ate. None were excluded. None were left behind. And this all, this reality that they all ate, is more poignant, is more powerful than perhaps we acknowledge.

Or that we understand. When we think about it in the context of the complex dietary regulations that the Jews sought to live by, that often served to exclude from the meal table rather than to welcome.

This is the religious context that many were often excluded. No, you can't come to the table. You can't eat. You can't be here. And here we read of this table in the wilderness. And all ate.

None were excluded. Jesus didn't say, well, hang on a minute. You guys over here, no, you're not getting anything. No, you're not welcome. You've done some bad things today, or you're not from the right family, or you're not from the right nationality. No, you can all eat. They all ate.

There were no exclusions at the shepherd's wilderness table. And that remains true today. Whoever you are, whatever your background, whatever you've done, whatever the life that you've lived, you are welcome at the banquet table of the good shepherd. He welcomes you. There is food for you.

[35 : 03] They all ate. But we're told, of course, that not only did they eat, but they were satisfied. They were all satisfied. And Mark is, and we don't for a moment deny that Mark here is speaking in the first instance of their physical hunger. They ate food, and they were satisfied. They began their meal hungry.

They ended their meal full and satisfied. But in acknowledging Jesus' power to satisfy their spiritual hunger, there is, without doubt, an acknowledgement that here is one who is able to satisfy our every need and our deepest need. That implication is inescapable.

Whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, whatever your need, whether you acknowledge it or other ones, Jesus is the one who can satisfy. And maybe I could end by extending to you an invitation.

It's not really an invitation that I am extending. I'm simply relaying the invitation. It is God who makes this invitation to you this morning. And the words of the invitation can be found in a psalm, in Psalm 81, in verse 10. And these are the words of invitation that I extend to you in the light of what we have discovered concerning Jesus this morning. God says to you, open wide your mouth, and I will fill it. Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it. I have compassion on you. I can provide for you. I know your need.

Maybe you don't know what you need. Well, open wide, and I will fill you with that which you are in need of. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for what we discover concerning your Son, Jesus. We thank you very particularly this morning for his compassion.

[37 : 15] We thank you that he is the one who, when he saw the large crowd, he had compassion on them, for he knew that they were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless, in need of leadership and direction of sustenance. We thank you that the compassion of Jesus is a constant. We thank you that it is not something that grows or wanes. We thank you that it is, like Jesus himself, the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so, this morning, we can be confident that this same Jesus has this same compassion for us in our need. And we pray that as we have been confronted with one who is able and willing to satisfy, so we would be those who open our mouths wide that he might satisfy us. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.