

Study Notes: “The Feeding of the Five Thousand”

John 6:1-15

Introduction: (Read John 6:1-15) This 4th of the sign-miracles of Jesus, recorded by John, has significance – it points beyond itself to something far greater. It reveals who Jesus is and the reason He came (cf. John 20:30-31). We will see this in the weeks to come as we move through the events and discourse which follow the miracle. For right now let’s take an initial look at the miracle.

Jesus Performs The Sign Miracle Of Multiplying Loaves And Fish In Order To Feed Five Thousand – cf. John 6:1-15 – There are four things I going to say initially about this miracle.

1. The “simple” miracle was like unto an act of creation. In multiplying five small barley loaves and two small fish into a feast more than sufficient for feeding at least five thousand men Jesus exercised a power similar to that which He exercised in creation. Jesus demonstrated, once again, that He was in this world as the one who made this world (cf. John 1:1-3, 9-11).
2. This was an act of compassion – Jesus saw the needs of people hungry and fatigued and He provided food and rest for them. Jesus “bent down” to meet a very basic and temporal human need – (cf. Matthew 14:14f; 15:29-32f; Mark 6:34f.).
3. This miracle was a demonstration that Jesus is willing and able to “be” our sufficiency. He is able to meet us in our time of need and supply for us all that we need. It easily speaks to us of His ongoing presence and His goodness and supply.

This miracle – at first glance – is a work in which Jesus provides for the temporal and physical needs of a people for food/bread. From the perspective of those who received the food - it clearly met them in the place of temporal hunger and supply – supply for the ongoing need and tedium of supplying food for sustenance – a need that is never absolutely/permanently met (cf. 6:26-27; also Isaiah 55:1-2).

4. As I said earlier - this miracle is the fourth of the signs of Jesus, which John chooses out from among all of the miracles Jesus’ disciples witnessed. These signs were chosen and recorded by John in order to demonstrate convincingly “...that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ), the Son of God” to the end that we, who read John’s gospel, might believe in Him and “...have life in His name” (John 20:30-31).

John’s purpose statement tells us that this miracle – like the others – is a sign which points beyond itself – so incredibly far beyond the miracle itself - to who Jesus really is AND the ultimate reason for His coming.

- This miracle – like the others – **is a work, redemptive in character and quality - a work in which Jesus is participating with the Father.** It bears the compassion of God on display in

the incarnation and the solidarity the Son enters into with us – **for the glory of the Father and the rescue of fallen humanity** (cf. Matthew 14:14f; 15:29-32f; Mark 6:34f).

Note: The meaning the people infer from Jesus' miracle – their understanding of what Jesus did and what it declares about Him – AND Jesus' response to their conclusion tells us that what they took away from the events of that afternoon were not at all what Jesus was declaring. This sets up a confrontation between what Jesus is actually declaring by this single event and how the people whom He fed understand it (cf. 6:14-15).

Jesus Did Not Accommodate The Perspectives/Categories Of Thinking By Which They Understood His Miracle – He Confronted It With The Categories Set By The Gospel – Note: In his study of the life of the fourth century Church Father – Athanasius - John Piper uses the term category to describe how Athanasius took on those who rejected the deity of Christ. He cites Andrew Walls reference to these categories in terms of missions – “indigenous principle” – “all things to all people” – “pilgrim principle” – Transformed by the renewing of our minds.

1. Jesus did not give in to their understanding – acquiesce for the time to their easy and comfortable category. If He had His following would have increased and flourished but based on false foundations. There would be a day when Jesus' cross would blow up their comfortable category and they would've been crushed by it (cf. 6:14-15 – make Him King of a kingdom of this world – cf. Matthew 4:1-11).

Jesus challenged/blew up their comfortable category and replaces it with a gospel category (cf. 6:25-27). These are the people who followed Jesus to that place on the far side of the Sea of Galilee because they had seen His miraculous healings (cf. 6:1-2) and now they had been fed with bread like no other. **Watch how the discourse progresses;**

- Those who had been fed looked for Jesus – 6:22-24

- Jesus identified and challenged their motive for seeking Him – 6:25-27 – He continued to challenge the “category” intuitive to the fallen mind (cf. 6:27).

- The Jews did not understand and they asked for a sign. In asking for a sign they gave the illustration of the manna – “bread from heaven” – which God gave them in the wilderness (cf. 6:28-31).

- Jesus corrected their thinking by declaring that it was His Father who gave them the “true bread” from heaven. The manna pointed beyond itself to the life giving bread of God (cf. 6:32-34).

- Jesus declares Himself to be the bread of life (cf. 6:35-40). Their categories would not yield to gospel categories (cf. 6:41-42). The progression of the dialogue led to many of those disciples abandoning Jesus and leaving Him.

Why did Jesus do this? Was He being purposely and needlessly difficult? I will only touch on the answer to this question because I think it is critical for our thinking and moving forward as a church on mission with God/Jesus.

2. Jesus would not allow the truth of His Father's glory on display in Him and the work He came to do be fit into the categories of fallen human minds. The very fundamentals of the gospel – Incarnation – God becoming fully human while remaining fully God in order to enter into solidarity with fallen humanity; crucifixion – all of the sin of every human being, the curse in brought on humanity and creation, the decay, death and judgement which is the lot of us all – put on Jesus; His resurrection to eternal life on our behalf and His exaltation to glory where He is seated now and we are seated with Him – these all utterly confront the categories by which see and understand our world.

John Piper warns pastors and churches – ***“And if you want to grow a church the temptation is to give the people what they already have categories to understand and enjoy. But once that church is grown, it thinks so much like the world that the difference is not decisive. The radical, biblical gospel is blunted and the glory of Christ is obscured.”***

3. Jesus – from the beginning – did not shy away from big gospel categories. We must understand that – from the start and at its essence – the gospel is confrontational and challenges our most basic and innate category of reality – the deity of the individual – with the glory of God!! The very need for the Son of God to enter into to solidarity with fallen humanity in order to provide for us the only and necessary work of grace for our reconciliation with the God whom we have deeply offended by rejecting His love and Lordship – is a truth category which is offensive and abhorrent to our souls. ***Jesus rejected their response to His miracle and opened a category of thought/understanding which alone allowed room for the blessed hope of life and provided a vista for seeing the true glory of God!!***

Note: Now I want to go back to this miracle and take you with me to the confrontation of one of my temporal categories which took place as I thought about this passage.

If Jesus Was Indeed Demonstrating Compassion For This People – If He Proved His Presence, Creative Power And Willingness To Be Their Sufficiency In Matters Of Food And Hunger – Then Why Do I See Pictures Of Starving Children Being Held By Grieving Parents?

Here's my problem – In the light of this powerful and accommodating miracle of compassion – why am I forced to look at parents holding children emaciated from hunger on the verge of death. Jesus could literally cause bread to fall from the clouds?! Why is Jesus – in compassion – meeting the temporal needs of these people and not meeting the needs of those children wracked with malnutrition or even dying in hunger and disease? How are we – the church – to understand and respond to the real world needs we see around us in gospel terms? This is a little like the friends of Mary and Martha who were grieving with them in the loss of their brother when they saw Jesus look upon the grieving sisters and He wept (cf. John 11:33-37). There are many layers

to the answer to this specific question (a question which encroaches upon the bigger question of the problem of evil and suffering).

The gospel addresses this so powerfully. This falls under the temporal category of thinking – with a smattering of the eternal (cf. Matthew 16:19-22; 25:34-46; Rich young ruler). Here is the gospel category - We are left here as the “body of Christ” – the dwelling place of God among man. We become the arm of not only His redemptive truth – the gospel – but of His tangible love and compassion to this fallen world. ***This is more than simply the “indigenous principle” If we are to address human need rightly - address hunger rightly - we must care with the heart of God on display in the gospel. This goes to the essence of these sign miracles. We must look upon human suffering with the heart of God on display in Jesus – the element of incarnation love which says “I came to experience it all and to sympathize with them” – the element which understands all suffering, including temporal hunger and thirst and fatigue, to be an element of the fallen condition of humanity and the creation in which we live.*** If the world is to have its hunger satisfied then the church must bear the heart of God to the world in need (not that God doesn’t miraculously meet needs). If the world is to learn to value human life – to see themselves, understand their identity as God’s image bearers – men learn to care for/selflessly love the women and children in their lives – etc. then the church must model and speak the gospel AND love what is good and disdain what is evil. ***It is easy for us to be generous with another’s money or repentant, affirming and kind at another’s expense – that is today’s cultural climate. However, the principle of incarnation is both generosity and sympathy (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:1-9; also Hebrews 2:14-18).***

Second at the layer of Gospel/redemption - This falls under the new category which allows us to see the work of Jesus as so far beyond the feeding of hungry people to the deep gospel truths of incarnation, Tri-unity of God, solidarity with broken and fallen humanity in this world, crucifixion, resurrection and exaltation – this miracle is clearly explained in terms of the gospel. ***We must look upon human suffering with the heart of God on display in Jesus – the element of incarnation love which says “I came in total solidarity with the hungry etc. in order to experience it all, not simply to sympathize with them, but to do as only God can do – to take it all into myself in order to conquer it all.” This is the element of the gospel which understands all suffering, including temporal hunger and thirst and fatigue, to be an element of the fallen condition of humanity and the creation in which we live Jesus gave everything to feed these people but did He come simply to feed hungry people?!!*** It cost Him no less to turn water into wine at the wedding in Cana or to feed these tired and hungry people – than it did for Him to call Lazarus out of the tomb or to speak life to my dead soul – to secure eternal life for you and me – to conquer sin, the fall, the curse and death (cf. Romans 5:12-21).

When we address hunger, poverty, racial strife, abortion, same sex attraction (“marriage”), gender dysphoria, war and peace, marriage, substance abuse, – they cannot be ***biblically, effectively and lovingly*** discussed/addressed only/simply in temporal and worldly terms (to include biological, sociological, psychological, political, scientific etc.). These all are, at their

core/heart, gospel issues. We must bear the mind and heart of Jesus into all of these issues and more.

Question: Do you really believe that Jesus came – God entered in – simply to feed the hungry, to fix strife in marriages, to make sick people well...? The God who spoke it all into existence easily has power to make all that we need for our daily supply and dropped it in on a cloud – that is what He effectively did for Israel while they wandered in the wilderness for 40 years (cf. 6:30-33).

Application: 1. Do the hard work of being an “incarnational” Christian. Look into the depth of the “mystery” of Christ and pursue the “pilgrim” categories of **God** become man – hold yourself accountable to think in those categories. There is such majesty and such a depth to glory of God on display in Jesus – certainly we can’t accept trite, chipper or expedient explanations of the gospel – formulaic presentations of things “that work” as the scope of the glory (cf. 1 Peter 1:9-12). 2. Then move into the world as an “incarnational” Christian with the heart of God – the love of God – for this fallen world. It cost Jesus everything to turn that water into wine and multiply the loaves and fish – as much as it cost Him to raise Lazarus. What price are you willing to pay to bear His image rightly to our world. We bear to the world the heart of the gospel – in the indigenous categories of God become **Man**. **Note:** It is as “pilgrims” that we confront the world with heavenly categories which alone can open up vistas of glory to a world shrouded in darkness. It is as the “indigenous” Christian that we prove those categories to be powerful to transform – we earn points of credibility as we speak when we move into this fallen world with the heart of God on Gospel mission with God. 3. Let your motivation be that of Jesus – as one who “seeks” the glory of God and not the “glory” of man. It is only then that we can be free to rejoice when people reject us – “out rejoice” those who oppose us (cf. 1 Peter 1:3-8).