

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT

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### Matthew 14:13-21

In the NT, there is only one miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all the gospels. It is a passage known as ‘the feeding of the five thousand.’ We can read this extraordinary story in Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:33-44, Luke 9:11-17, and John 6:2-14. The fact that all four evangelists recorded it shows that its meaning is of great importance in our understanding of Jesus. Let’s look at this incident in Matthew 14:13-21.

*Matthew 14:13. When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities.*

*14 And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick.*

*15 When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food."*

*16 But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."*

*17 And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."*

*18 He said, "Bring them here to Me."*

*19 Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes.*

*20 So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained.*

*21 Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

### A didactic miracle

How the disciples came by twelve such baskets out in the countryside is one of those little mysteries which we don’t have an explanation. It is also surprising that there is no mention of the crowd’s reaction to the miracle. It is hard to imagine that people were unaware of where the food had come from, and simply accepted it without question. Well, John tells us that they were aware that a miracle was happening. And they were so excited at *the sign that Jesus did*, that they said, *"This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world"* (John 6:14).

If you have been a Christian for some time, you probably have heard at least one sermon on that passage. Many people like to preach on it. And often, the point that is emphasized is that if you will commit to God your small gifts, your small abilities, the little that you have, i.e. the five loaves and two fish, then the Lord will bless it to such an extent as to feed the multitudes. So the feeding of the five thousand is said to picture how Jesus can miraculously multiply the believer’s human resources.

Now, I would like to suggest that there is an important aspect of this miracle which is didactic, i.e., which purpose is to teach. The Lord Jesus wanted to use this miracle to teach the disciples something. And it is here that we are going to find the key to becoming what we ought to be in the world, namely to be channels of God's blessing for others. Why do I say that there is an element of teaching in this miracle? Look at v. 16. *But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."* The 'you' here is emphasized in the Greek. **You** give them something... Jesus was stressing that it was the disciples' responsibility. They were to take care of the needs of the crowd. They were to feed the people. The command to the disciples deliberately involved them in the action so that they will remember and learn from it.

### **Put on the spot**

But think about it. Expressed in that context, these words were quite puzzling. You see, the crowd had been with Jesus the whole day, listening to His preaching. Now it was late. Sundown was soon to come. It was time for Jesus to stop and let the people go. However, He gave no sign of stopping. So the disciples did the common sense thing. They suggested that He dismiss the crowd. 'Send the people home so that they can rest and get something to eat. They can always come back tomorrow.' That was a reasonable suggestion, isn't it? Now look at Jesus' response. He said, 'No. There is no need for them to go away. You give them something to eat.' If Jesus had said, 'I will give them food,' there would be no issue here. But this is not what we observe. He said, 'You give them something to eat.'

I can imagine the disciples pulling out their handkerchief, wiping their brows and looking at this crowd of 5000 people, plus women and children. 'We are going to give them something to eat? It's impossible! We don't even have enough food for ourselves!' That is what I mean by 'didactic'. The Lord wanted to teach them something. And the question is, 'What did He want to teach them?' He knew that they only had five loaves of bread and two fish. What is the point of putting them on the spot like that?

This is not a question of whether God can multiply five loaves and two fish. Of course He can do that. For that matter, He could feed the multitude with nothing. He doesn't need five loaves and two fish. But that is not the issue. The question is, 'What is the point of asking the disciples to feed the crowd? What exactly did Jesus want to teach them through that action?' That's what we want to discuss.

I am sure that these disciples, being put on the spot as they were, never forgot that lesson. 'The Lord asks us to feed them. But with what are we going to do this?' And you know, what Jesus said to His disciples, He is also saying it to us today. He looks upon the world today, and says to you and to me, 'You feed them.' And you say, 'How am I going to do this? I don't have much to feed them with. I am not very talented. I can't do this. I can't do that...'

### **Moved with compassion**

What is the key to understand this whole thing? Look at v. 14. Here is the vital point that we must get hold of. *And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and **He was moved with compassion for them**, and healed their sick.* Jesus was moved with compassion.

This word 'compassion' translates a Greek word which means the 'innards', the 'inner parts' of the body. It is also employed for 'bowels', the digestive tract. The idea is that it refers to something deep inside of us. So *splagchnizomai*, to have compassion, indicates a strong inner feeling. It is to feel deeply, to feel viscerally, to be moved as to one's bowels.

In English, we say for example that our heart is touched. The word 'heart', of course, refers to the muscle which is pumping blood in our body. When we say, 'My heart is touched', we are giving to the word 'heart' a figurative meaning which refers to the seat of our feelings. So we speak of the heart to mean our emotions. And that's exactly what the Greek does with the word 'compassion'. Instead of speaking of the heart, it refers to our innards, to our bowels, because it wants to emphasize the fact that compassion is not a superficial feeling. It is not associated with your skin or with your hair – which is on the surface – but with something deep inside of you. Compassion comes from the depth of your being.

In the book of the Maccabees, an apocrypha book, *splagchnizomai* is used to express the feeling of a mother for her seven sons. You have to know that all her sons were killed for their faith. This mother saw them being tortured to death one by one. And there, in 4Maccabees 14:13, the book speaks of her compassion for her sons as she saw them suffering. Can we understand the feeling of this mother?

The same word is used of the Lord Jesus in the feeding of the five thousand. He looked upon the crowd. He saw them hungry. He felt their hunger. And He had compassion on them. The helplessness of the people pierced His heart.

### **Being a channel for God through compassion**

What is the Lord Jesus trying to teach His disciples in the words of v. 16? Notice this. The passage tells us that He had compassion on the crowd. And then we read that He said to His disciples, *You give them something to eat*. That is strange. If Jesus had compassion on the multitude, He should be the one feeding them, don't you think? But we see something different. He told His disciples to feed them! Could there be a link between Jesus' compassion and the feeding of the crowd by the disciples?

Yes, there is one. And this is the whole point of what Jesus is trying to teach them. He is saying to them, 'I want you to know how I feel for this crowd. I want you to share my compassion for them, to share my burden to feed them. You have compassion on this crowd – not just Me. Can you feel what I feel for them? If you can feel what I feel, then you feed them.'

Jesus knew that they lacked compassion. True, they had a certain concern for the people. But they did not have the gripping compassion that He wanted to see in them. And the Lord had to change them. They will not be able to feel the needs of the people if their hardness is not taken away. They will not be able to identify with them.

Now, why is it so important that they have compassion? Here is the key factor that the Lord wanted to show His disciples. Compassion is important because it allows the power of God to flow from them to the crowd. When they begin to have compassion in their hearts, they are allowing Jesus' power to work through them.

Look at it from this angle. Do you not think that Jesus knew very well that His disciples had no way of feeding the five thousand? Of course He knew that! So why did He ask them? For this very reason. Because He wanted to feed the five thousand through them. Therefore they had to open up in their compassion so that His compassion, Jesus' compassion, can flow through them, through their compassion for the people.

### **Rivers of living water will flow**

Do you see what I mean? Today, the waters of life are available for the world. The vast reservoir of God's grace is there, if I can put it like that. When the tap is open, the waters of eternal

life will flow out from us to the world. And compassion is what opens the tap and makes God's grace available to the multitudes.

This is what Jesus wanted to teach His disciples. He was saying to them, 'I will not always be here with you to attend to the needs of the crowds. I'm going to the cross. I'm going to open the gates of heaven for these crowds. I'm going to let the water of life flow out from heaven. But you will be here and you are going to give them that water of life. You will be a channel of water to others. You will give them something to eat.'

We read in John 7:37-38 this amazing revelation.

*John 7:37. On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.*

*38 "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, **out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.**"*

'If you believe in Me,' the Lord Jesus says, 'out of your heart shall flow rivers of living water.' The word 'heart' (*koilia*) here is a word which in Greek means 'innards', just like the word compassion. It is a different Greek word, but a synonym. The King James version has the word 'belly', *out of his belly*...

'He who believes in Me, out of his belly, out of his innermost being, the seat of compassion, will flow rivers of living water.' This is where the living water comes from, from the seat of compassion. That is why I said that compassion is what opens the tap in us and makes God's grace available to mankind. And it is not just a few drops. Not a few streams. But rivers of living water. The tap can be opened to such an extent that God's grace becomes like rivers of living water. It is a matter of how compassionate we are.

You see, we are not saved just so that we can get to heaven. We are saved to perform a function here and now – to be fountains of living water. Each believer is to be an instrument by which living water shall be poured down on the world. We are to become channels of blessing for God. And if this is to happen, then what we need above all things is to become like Christ in His compassion. We need the Holy Spirit to so transform us that when we look at the multitudes, we too have compassion. Then rivers of living water will flow out of our heart.

### **The necessity to listen well**

In the NT, the verb 'have compassion' is used only of Jesus Himself (except in three parables: the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:27); the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:33); the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:20)). It is always evoked by a need that the Lord sees. In the feeding of the five thousand, we are told that *when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them...* (v. 14). He was very observant. He looked at the crowd with a heart sensitive to their needs. What He saw was the helplessness of the people and that touched Him. He felt compassion. He was moved to help them and to teach His disciples the great necessity of seeing people and having compassion for them.

Now, compassion is a feeling, and like any feeling, it is not something we can decide to have. It comes in reaction to something. I personally believe that our capacity to have compassion can be shaped by the way we look at others. It is a way in which there is an intentional identification with people. And it seems to me that this empathetic identification with others begins by listening well to the other person. People who are compassionate recognize that in listening carefully, they grant a special gift to others, the gift of taking them seriously.

To hear is one thing. To listen is to hear and also to appreciate where someone else stands, how someone else feels, how someone else thinks. Listening to another is a fundamental means by which we take another person seriously and honor him. We cannot have compassion unless we enter into another person's life by a process of identification. And we cannot do this unless we listen, and listen well.

I feel the need to say this because it is well known that spiritual workers often lack realism. Some are so enveloped in spiritual ministries that they don't seem to be in touch with the material aspect of life. In their work, they focus solely on people's 'spiritual needs' and do not pay attention to their physical needs. They don't listen to the people.

God created the whole person, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually and physically, and He cares about needs in all those areas. Jesus gave proof of this in his feeding of the five thousand. And the cause of his miraculous activity is traced back to His compassion on the multitudes.

### **Three essentials for ministry**

In this passage, we see Jesus teaching His disciples their part in the work of God. He showed them the raw essentials for ministry. He had called them to minister, to show people that He was the answer to human helplessness. They were to meet the day-to-day needs of people as much as they could.

We are called to do the same thing today. We also have our five thousand to feed. Many of us often feel that in view of our large responsibilities and personal inadequacies, we have an insufficient 'five loaves and two fish' with which to address our five thousand. We are easily discouraged by 'realities' that tell us we cannot cope. And here, Jesus is teaching us three essentials for ministry.

The first essential for ministry is seeing people and having compassion. In this respect, we talked about listening to people and identifying with them. Notice that the disciples were being awakened to the need and moved by Christ's compassion. They had to learn to have compassion.

The second essential for ministry is accepting our duty to minister. The command of Christ is 'Give' – give them something to eat. It is addressed to every Christian. We all have the responsibility to give what we have and do what we can. That is our part in meeting the needs of the world.

And the third essential for ministry is trusting Christ to use our resources. Jesus did not feed the five thousand apart from the disciples' limited resources. And the little food they had grew as it was distributed. We have to bring what we have to Him if we are to see the needs of men met. Then whatever we share, we trust that Christ will multiply it enough to meet those needs.