

Let's keep our Bibles open right there at Matthew chapter 14, as we look at a very famous story from the life of Jesus: the feeding of the 5000. Interestingly, aside from the resurrection, the feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. So, there must be something very significant for us to see in this passage. And as we consider this story, we'll certainly see how this miracle magnifies the glory of Christ. But I also want us to see how this story speaks to a very common human experience.

As I've reflected on these verses, I've found some great encouragement for when I feel worn down and weary, for times when I feel like I've got nothing left to give. I trust I'm not the only one who has ever felt that way. As human beings, we all have limited capacity. Like cars that run out of gas (or battery if you've gone electric), we sometimes find ourselves running on fumes, drained, and in need of replenishment. It happens for all kinds of reasons. Maybe it's a relentless schedule that leaves us overworked and overextended. Maybe it's a battle with anxiety that keeps us from sleep, or a depression that leaves us feeling like no sleep is ever enough. Maybe it's an illness, grief, or the weight of some other burden. Or maybe it's the cumulative effect of serving others, constantly pouring out, but rarely taking in.

As finite creatures, we get tired, and we grow weary. But our responsibilities don't disappear just because we're worn out. The demands of work, family, and ministry don't stop. And sometimes we find ourselves wondering, what am I supposed to do!? Maybe this is the precise position you find yourself in today. We've all been there, and we'll all be there again. But there's help for us in this passage today, because in these verses Jesus shows us the way to keep going and to keep giving. So, let's learn from him. The first thing to learn from him is that it is important for us to...

1. Pursue Rest

We'll pick up the story in verse 13, where Matthew tells us, *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself.*

Now, what did Jesus hear that caused him to withdraw to a desolate place? There are two possibilities. Matthew may be referring to when Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist. That follows nicely from the previous verse. In verse 12 we read that John's disciples buried John's body after he was killed and then went and told Jesus what had happened. If it was this news that caused Jesus to withdraw, then he may be going away with a heart full of grief. After all, John the Baptist was Jesus's relative. They were not only partners in ministry, but members of the same extended family. And just as Jesus wept at the graveside of his friend, Lazarus, Jesus may be going away to grieve the death of John.

But there's another possibility. The account of the death of John the Baptist was an excursus in Matthew 14. Matthew places the story here to explain Herod's reaction to Jesus's growing fame. This is mentioned in verses 1-2. Therefore, Jesus may have withdrawn because he heard about Herod's interest in his ministry. And while Jesus knew that eventually, he would stand before Herod and Pilate who would send him to the cross, He also knew that it was not yet time. So, he went away, like he did when the Pharisees began to conspire against him in Matthew 12:15. Either way, Jesus gets in a boat and sets out across the sea of Galilee to a desolate place, a place of quiet and rest.

Though Matthew says he went by himself, that does not mean he went alone. As always, he brought his inner circle, his disciples, with him. In Mark's Gospel we learn that he brought them for a particular reason. The disciples have just come back from a mission trip. Jesus sent them out to minister in his name. Mark tells us, *The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat* (Mark 6:30-31).

This journey to a desolate place is a journey in pursuit of rest. Jesus, perhaps burdened by grief, or danger, or both is seeking a time of rest. And he is telling the disciples, who have been extending themselves in service to others, you need some rest as well. Isn't this wonderful? If we are ever tempted to think that rest is wrong, that we shouldn't be so needy, here is the Son of God seeking rest for himself and calling his disciples to pursue rest too. As Psalm 103:14 says, *He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.*

We are dust. We are limited by design. We are weak and God knows it. So, we can stop pretending it isn't true. As I heard one pastor put it: "We don't need to repent because we're not all-powerful, we need to repent because we've tried to be." We need to pursue rest. And in this little account of Jesus and his disciples getting out of town, he gives us some very practical strategies for finding rest in this busy and exhausting world. These strategies are far more effective than disengaging from reality through digital distraction, or numbing our senses through substances, or masking our fatigue with some other vice. No, here Jesus invites us to pursue rest by getting outside, connecting with friends, nourishing our bodies, and enjoying his presence. It's all so practical, and it's all right here. Do you see it?

A. Get outside

*He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a **desolate place** and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.* (Mark 6:31)

Jesus is leading his disciples to a desolate place, a wilderness place, to rest a while. There's something so refreshing about getting outside into God's creation. The famous British pastor, Charles Spurgeon, battled both physical ailments and deep depression throughout his life and ministry. But he was often refreshed by getting out of London and spending time at the sea. And in one of my favorite quotes, Spurgeon once said, "He who forgets the humming of the bees among the heather, the cooing of the wood-pigeons in the forest, the song of birds in the woods, the rippling of rills among the rushes, and the sighing of the wind among the pines, needs not wonder if his heart forgets to sing and his soul grows heavy. A day's breathing of fresh air upon the hills, or a few hours, ramble in the beech woods' umbrageous calm, would sweep the cobwebs out of the brain... A mouthful of sea air, or a stiff walk in the wind's face, would not give grace to the soul, but it would yield oxygen to the body, which is next best."¹

¹ Spurgeon, *Lectors to My Students*.

Now, I know we live in Illinois. We don't live by the sea, or the mountains, or any particularly grand or wondrous wilderness. But you know what? A few weeks ago, I found myself worn down and weary, and the Lord used a 30-minute walk at the Deer Grove Forest Preserve in Palatine to sweep away some cobwebs out of my brain! Let's learn from Jesus's example. Pursue rest by getting outside into God's creation, and connecting with friends, with God's people.

B. Connect with friends

Again, *He said to them, “**Come away by yourselves** to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.* (Mark 6:31)

Notice, the word “yourselves” is plural. Jesus wasn't sending them on a solo wilderness adventure, like participants on the show “Alone.” He was inviting them to take a break from their ministry and spend some time together. There's nothing wrong with pursuing rest alone. Solitude and silence can be very refreshing. But God also designed us for community. He created us to benefit from the blessing of relationships with people who encourage us and build us up. So, pursue rest by getting outside, connecting with friends, and nourishing your body.

C. Nourish your body

Look at Mark 6:31 one more time: *He said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and **they had no leisure even to eat.*** (Mark 6:31)

The disciples are so slammed by ministry demands that they can't even eat. And Jesus knows they can't keep going on like this. So, he gives them a break, an opportunity to refuel. Again, he knows our frame! He knows our bodies need the nourishment of good food, the hydration of water, and the replenishment of sleep. As you read the Gospels, you'll see Jesus himself eating and drinking and sleeping! During his earthly life, Jesus nourished his body. We should not neglect ours. Jesus invites us to pursue rest by getting outside, connecting with friends, and nourishing our bodies. Then, lastly, and most importantly here: Jesus invites us to rest by enjoying his presence.

D. Enjoy Jesus's presence

Here's Luke's account of this story: Luke 9 verse 10 says, *On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And **he took them and withdrew...***

Notice, Jesus took them! They went with him! He invited them to find rest in his presence. He himself is our ultimate source of rest. As we come to him, as we listen to him through his Word, talk to him in prayer, and strive to walk in step with his Spirit, we will find rest for our souls. Friends, this is good news. In this hectic and exhausting world, Jesus is inviting us to find calm and replenishment in his creation, his people, his gifts, and ultimately, in himself. So, when you are worn down and weary, pursue rest in these ways! These are not the only

ways to rest. But these are good ways. And yet, what do you do when something gets in the way? What do you do when your plan for rest is interrupted by a sick kid, a work emergency, a ministry opportunity, or some other pressing need? Well, watch what Jesus does: He extends compassion.

2. Extend Compassion

I realize we're already 20 minutes into this message and we've only made it through half a verse. So, I will pick up the pace. But, look once again at verse 13. Matthew tells us, *Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.*

Uh oh. This good plan for rest is about to get interrupted. Someone leaked the details of Jesus's itinerary. And as Jesus and his disciples sail across the sea, people are gathering on the other side. So, verse 14 tells us: *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd...* (v.14). How does Jesus respond to this? I'll tell you how I'd be tempted to respond.

I'd probably look at the disciples and say, "Who told everyone where we were going? Come on guys! I need a break. You need a break. You know what? Turn this boat around. Let's go somewhere else."

But that's not how Jesus responds. *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick* (v.14). Jesus's gut reaction to this interruption is compassion. He knows these people need him and what he has to offer, so he helps. And he doesn't do it begrudgingly muttering complaints under his breath. That phrase, *"he had compassion on them,"* could be translated, "his heart went out to them." He responds to this inconvenience, this disruption of his plans, with mercy and grace.

I find this very moving and very convicting. Because it's not always my response when my rest gets interrupted. And I trust I'm not alone. It's easy to respond to interruptions with frustration. When you put the kids to bed, tidy up the house, and finally sit down on the couch, but a child appears at the bottom of the stairs or calls you back into the room. When you set the autoreply on your work email, and begin a much-needed vacation, but a phone call alerts you to a situation that requires your attention. When you're walking out of church, excited for your Sunday afternoon plans, but someone from your LIFE group approaches you with tears in their eyes, asking if you can meet to talk and pray. Our gut reaction may be frustration, but Jesus calls us to imitate him and extend compassion.

As Colossians 3:12 says, *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience* (Colossians 3:12).

Yet, someone might say, "But I'm running on fumes! I'm so depleted! Where can I find the strength to give to others when I feel so empty?" Well, that brings us to the miracle this morning. As we consider the rest of this story, I want you to see that the only way we'll have something to give is if we...

3. Receive Grace

Look at verse 15: *Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves."*

Let's think the best of the disciples here. They're not being rude by telling Jesus to send the crowds away. They're being practical, helpful even. The crowds have been out all day in this desolate place, they all have a long walk home, and they haven't had anything to eat. So, the disciples want to make sure they can get some food for their journey. *But*, verse 16, *Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

Maybe if Jesus said, "I will give them something to eat..." the disciples would have been a bit more confident. After all, they've seen Jesus turn water into wine, heal the sick, and calm the storm! They know about his power. But notice, Jesus tells them to provide for this crowd. This massive crowd! Verse 21 tells us that there were about 5000 men there that day, and that was apart from the women and the children who were there as well! So, the disciples are probably looking at 15-20,000 people. And Jesus is saying, "Give them some food." But verse 17, *They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish."*

They look at the number of people, the size of the need, and what they have to offer, and it's clearly not enough. We can relate to this! We look at the way God is calling us to serve, and we look at what we've got, and we know we don't have enough! But watch what Jesus says next. The disciples say, "All we've got are these five loaves and these two fish." Verse 18: *And he said, "Bring them here to me."*

I love this. Jesus says to his disciples, and he says to us, "Watch what I can do with what you've got." Verse 19-20: *Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.*

Jesus turns this desolate wilderness into a banquet hall. He tells everyone to sit down. And as was customary for the head of the household in 1st century Israel, Jesus offers the blessing, thanking God for the food he provides. And then, he gives his disciples everything they need to serve the people. The whole crowd eats and is satisfied! This wasn't a snack. This was a feast! There are even leftovers to take home. It's a stunning miracle. And it teaches us something very wonderful: When Jesus calls us to serve others, he will give us everything we need. Listen to these words from John 1:16. John writes, *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

We often think of grace as forgiveness. And surely, the grace that Jesus gives includes forgiveness! Praise God for that! But the word grace has a broader meaning, the word means gift, and there are many gifts that Jesus gives to his people. For example, he gives us the gift of strength to keep going, to keep serving, though we never would have had the resources to do so on our own. As Paul writes in Colossians 1:29, reflecting on his own ministry, *For this I toil,*

struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. Serving others is not always easy! It's toil. It's a struggle. But it's possible because Jesus supplies us with his own energy! That is his grace to us. And when we feel like we're at our wits end, and we're tempted to impatience and irritation, when compassion feels beyond our reach, Jesus gives us the gift of his own character.

Philippians 2:4-5 says, *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...* Brothers and sisters, do you hear that? Christ has given you his mind, his way of seeing the needs of others and responding with compassion. By the power of his Holy Spirit at work within you, he will form this character within you. This is his grace. Sure, if all we have is what we *have*, we won't have enough. But, if we have Christ, and all that he graciously supplies, we have everything we need. So, if you've grown weary of serving in your home, at your office, here at church, or anywhere else, hear this invitation from Jesus today. He's telling you, "Bring what you have to me... and watch what I can do." Friend, draw near to him, and receive grace from him.

Conclusion

This story is full of encouragement for when we feel worn down and weary, for times when we feel like we've got nothing left to give. Jesus invites us to pursue rest. So, enjoy that walk outside today, call a friend, take a nap, eat a good meal, and give him thanks for these good gifts! But if your plans get interrupted by someone who needs your help, extend compassion. Let your heart go out to them. And remember, you and I may have very limited resources to serve others, but Jesus has everything we need. And from his fulness we have all received grace upon grace. So, bring him whatever you've got, no matter how meagre it looks, and watch how he can multiply it for the good of others and the praise of his name. He is worthy of our praise.

I mean, think about this in our last moment today: Who draws near to masses of people in the wilderness, showers them with compassion, and provides them with miraculous bread? If you've read your Old Testament, you know the answer. God does this. Perhaps the disciples were beginning to put the pieces together, but it will take one more miracle for them to come out and say it, that Jesus is God within their midst. But that's next week's story. I hope you'll come back and hear it.