

Commentary Notes

David Guzik https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/guzik_david/StudyGuide2017-Jhn/Jhn-6.cfm

Steve Cole <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-31-how-christ-meets-needs-john-61-15>

Tony Merida [Exalting Jesus in John](#) (\$2.99 on Amazon)

A.W. Pink [The Gospel of John](#) (99¢ on Amazon)

It might better be called the feeding of the 20,000, because there were 5,000 men, plus women and children. It's not just a literal miracle witnessed by thousands of people. It's also a parable with many lessons about the all-sufficiency of Jesus Christ to meet the vast needs of the world through His inadequate disciples. Although they were completely inadequate to meet the needs of this hungry crowd, they gave the little that they had to the Lord, who blessed it and multiplied it so that they could distribute it to the people.

John begins the story (6:1): "After these things Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (or Tiberias)." The last time note in John (5:1) mentioned an unnamed "feast of the Jews." If it was the Feast of Tabernacles, five to six months have passed. The other gospels inform us that Jesus has sent out the twelve on a ministry tour. They have come back and reported their experiences to Him. Meanwhile, they got word that Herod had beheaded John the Baptist. Jesus and the disciples were so busy with all the needy people that they didn't even have time to eat. So Jesus invited them to get away to a desolate place for some much needed rest.

So they took a boat across the northern end of the Sea of Galilee to a spot in the country north of Bethsaida (home of Philip, Andrew, and Peter). The problem was, the crowds saw them go, ran around the lake on foot, and greeted them as they disembarked (Mark 6:33). The disciples must have thought, "Oh no! We can't get away from these needy people!" But Jesus felt compassion for them, taught them, and healed their sick (Mark 6:34; Matt. 14:14).

Of all the miracles performed by the Lord Jesus the feeding of the five thousand is the only one recorded by each of the four Evangelists.

Of all the wonderful works which our Savior did none was quite so public as this, and none other was performed before so many witnesses.

In healing the sick and in raising the dead, something was amended or restored which already existed; but **here was an absolute creation. Only one other miracle in any wise resembles it—His first, when He made wine out of the water. These two miracles belong to a class by themselves, and it is surely significant, yea most suggestive, that the one reminds us of His precious blood, while the other points to His holy body, broken for us.** And here is, we believe, the chief reason why this miracle is mentioned by all of the four Evangelists: it shadowed forth the gift of Christ Himself. His other miracles exhibited His power and illustrated His work, but this one in a peculiar way sets forth the person of Christ, the Bread of Life.

The fact that this miracle of the feeding of the hungry multitude is recorded by all the Evangelists intimates that it has a universal application.

- Matthew's mention of it suggests to us that it foreshadows Christ, in a coming day, feeding Israel's poor—cf. Psalm 132:15.
- Mark's mention of it teaches us what is the chief duty of God's servants—to break the Bread of Life to the starving.
- Luke's mention of it announces the sufficiency of Christ to meet the needs of all men.
- John's mention of it tells us that Christ is the Food of God's people.

See the fascinating discussion referenced on page 8 about how these different accounts support and strengthen each other.

6:1 *After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias:* John now records some of the acts and words of Jesus in the Galilee region, north of Judea. John mainly recorded things that Jesus did and said in Judea and Jerusalem.

6:2a *And a large crowd was following him:* This miracle is also recorded in the other three Gospel accounts. Luke mentioned that on this occasion Jesus went out to a deserted place to be alone (Luke 9:10), yet the crowds followed Him there. Despite this imposition, Jesus still served the multitude with great compassion.

6:2b *they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick:* They saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased: Luke 9:11 tells us that Jesus also taught this multitude, something that John doesn't specifically mention.

- Greek reads more like this: "The multitude 'kept following' Jesus because they 'continually saw' the signs that He 'habitually did' on the sick." (Morris)
- As Jesus will later tell them (6:26-27), they were following Him because they ate their fill of the bread, but they should have been focused on the food that endures to eternal life. They are typical of so many in this world who are living for material things that will shortly perish, but they don't see their need for the food that endures to eternal life.
- **How completely these people failed in their discernment and appreciation of the person of Christ! They saw in Him only a wonderful Magician who could work miracles, a clever Physician that could heal the sick. They failed to perceive that He was the Savior of sinners and the Messiah of Israel. They were blind to His Divine glory. And is it any otherwise with the great multitude today? Alas, few of them see in Christ anything more than a wonderful Teacher and a beautiful Example.**

6:3 *Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples.*

- The 'high ground' is the sharply rising terrain east of the lake, well known today as the Golan heights. From there one overlooks the level plain east of the river and the lake. (Bruce)

6:4 *Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand:*

- John is the only one of the four Gospel writers who told us this took place near the time of the Passover. Perhaps this great multitude was made up of Galilean pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.
- John may want us to draw a parallel with Moses, who led the people out of Egypt after the Passover. Later, he went up on the mountain receive the Ten Commandments. God also used Moses to give manna to the people in the wilderness. So the mention of the Passover being near is probably more than just a time notice. John wants us to see Jesus as the new and better Moses. He fulfilled what the Passover lamb typified. He gave Himself as the permanent manna or bread of life. He is the Prophet of whom Moses wrote (Deut. 18:15; John 6:14).
- This seems introduced here in order to point again to the empty condition to Judaism at this time. The Passover was nigh, but the Lamb of God who was in their midst was not wanted by the formal religionists.

6:5 *Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?"*

- Perhaps Jesus asked Philip this question because he was from Bethsaida (John 1:44) and this was near where this miracle took place (Luke 9:10).
- John does not say, as Mark does (Mark 6:34 f.), that the crowd had been listening to Jesus' teaching all day, but this explains his concern about feeding them. (Bruce)
- While the multitude did not know Christ, His heart went out in tender pity to them. Even though an unworthy motive had drawn this crowd after Christ, He was not indifferent to their need. Matthew, in his account, tells us "And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them" (Matthew 14:14). So also Mark (Mark 6:34).

6:6 *He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.* Jesus knew what miracle He was about to perform, but wanted to use the opportunity to teach His disciples. For Jesus this wasn't only about getting a job done (feeding the multitude), but also about teaching His disciples along the way.

- Philip had already seen Jesus do many miracles; there should have been no question to him about the divine resources Jesus had.
- Jesus never tested anyone in the sense of tempting them to do wrong. But He does test His servants so that they can learn to trust Him more. As someone has observed, “It was not bread that He was seeking from Philip, but faith.”
- Jesus was showing Philip and the other disciples their woeful inadequacy to meet this need, along with His all-sufficiency. So this miracle teaches us that... **Christ uses inadequate people who surrender what they have to Him to meet the overwhelming needs of others.**
- **What happened to Philip is, in principle and essence, happening daily in our lives. How do such experiences find us? Do we, like Philip and Andrew did, look at our resources? Do we rack our minds to find some solution? or do our first thoughts turn to the Lord Jesus, who has so often helped us in the past? Here, right here, is the test of our faith.**

6:7 Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little.”

- Their problem was in at least two parts. First, they didn’t have the resources to buy bread and to feed the multitude. Second, even if they had the money it would be impossible to purchase enough bread to feed them all.
- With greater faith and knowledge, Philip might have said: “Master, I don’t know where the food is to feed this crowd but You are greater than Moses whom God used to feed a multitude everyday in the wilderness, and God can certainly do a lesser work through a Greater Servant. You are greater than Elisha, whom God used to feed many sons of the prophets through little food. What is more, the Scriptures say that man shall not live by bread alone, and You are great enough to fill this multitude from the words of your mouth.”
- Philip’s knowledge of the situation was accurate and impressive (two hundred denarii is more than six month’s wages), but his knowledge was useless in getting the problem solved.
- **Philip thought in terms of money; and how much money it would take to carry out God’s work in a small way (every one of them may have a little). We often limit God the same way, looking for how God’s work can be done in the smallest way. Jesus wanted to use a completely different approach and provide in a big way.**
- He was a man of figures; he believed in what could be put into tables and statistics. Yes; and like a great many other people of his sort, he left out one small element in his calculation, and that was Jesus Christ, and so his answer went creeping along the low levels. (Maclaren)
- Philip was apparently a matter-of-fact person (John 14:8), a quick reckoner and good man of business, and therefore more ready to rely on his own shrewd calculations than on unseen resources. (Dods)
- The problem was, they didn’t have 200 denarii and even if they did, it wasn’t enough. And even if they had more, there weren’t supermarkets just down the road that had enough bread on hand to feed 20,000 hungry people. But **how often we throw up our hands and conclude that we can’t do something for the Lord because we calculate based on our inadequate resources!**
- Nowhere in Scripture are numbers used haphazardly. Two hundred is a multiple of twenty, and in Scripture twenty signifies a vain expectancy, a coming short of God’s appointed time or deliverance.
 - For example, in Genesis 31:41 we learn how that Jacob waited twenty years to gain possession of his wives and property; but it was not until the twenty-first that God’s appointed deliverance came.
 - From Judges 4:3 we learn how that Israel waited twenty years for emancipation from Jabin’s oppression; but it was not until the twenty-first that God’s appointed deliverance came.
 - In 1 Samuel 7:2 we learn how that the ark abode in Kirjath-Jearim for twenty years, but it was in the twenty-first that God delivered it. As, then, twenty speaks of insufficiency, a coming short of God’s appointed deliverance, so two hundred conveys the same idea in an intensified form.
 - Two hundred is always found in Scripture in an evil connection: Joshua 7:21; Judges 17:4; 1 Samuel 30:10; 2 Samuel 14:26; Revelation 9:16. So the number here in John 6:7 suitably expressed Philip’s unbelief.

6:8 One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, “There is a boy here...”:

- Andrew once again introduced someone to Jesus. First it was his brother Peter (John 1:40-42). Now it was a lad with some barley loaves and two small fish.

- The word for 'lad' is a double diminutive, probably meaning 'little boy'. (Morris)

6:9b *who has five barley loaves*: Barley was always regarded as simple food, more often fit for animals than for people. This means it is likely that the young boy came from a poor family.

- In the Talmud, there is a passage where one man said, "There is a fine crop of barley" and another man answered, "Tell it to the horses and donkeys."
- Barley scarcely bore one-third of the value of wheat in the east (see Revelation 6:6). That it was a very mean fare appears from Ezekiel 13:19, where the false prophetesses are said to pollute the name of God for handfuls of barley, i.e. for the meanest reward. (Clarke)

6:9c *Two small fish*:

- While the other Evangelists use the ordinary word for fish (ichthys), John calls them osparia, indicating that they were two small (perhaps salted) fish to be eaten as a relish along with the cakes of barley. (Bruce)

6:9d *but what are they for so many?*

- **There wasn't much to work with, but God doesn't need much. In fact, God doesn't need any help – but He often deliberately restrains His work until He has our participation.**
- Jesus wasn't limited in any way by this meager lunch. And, He isn't limited today by the fact that we don't have enough money or time or talent to get the gospel to the whole world. **As Watchman Nee put it (Twelve Baskets Full [Hong Kong Church Book Room], 2:48), "The meeting of need is not dependent on the supply in hand, but on the blessing of the Lord resting on the supply."**
- Small things are not always contemptible. It all depends on the hands in which they are. (Taylor)

6:10 *Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."*

- Jesus was in no panic or hurry. He had a huge catering job to fulfill, but went about His work in an orderly way, making them sit down upon the grass.
- One might say that Jesus here fulfilled the role of the loving Shepherd in Psalm 23:1-2. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. That Psalm also gave the picture of the Lord as a host, serving a meal to His servant as a guest: you prepare a table for me...you anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over...I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 23:5-6).
- How thankful we should be that God's blessings are dispensed according to the riches of His grace, and not according to the poverty of our faith. What would have happened to that multitude if Christ had acted according to the faith of His disciples? Why, the multitude would have gone away unfed!
- How patient was the Lord with His disciples. There was no harsh rebuke for either Philip or Andrew. The Lord knoweth our frame and remembers that we are dust. "Make the men sit down" was a further test; this time of their obedience. And a searching test it was. What was the use of making a hungry multitude sit down when there was nothing to feed them with? Ah! but God had spoken; Christ had given the command, and that was enough. When He commands it is for us to obey, not to reason and argue.
- "If faith is weak, obedience is the best way in which it may be strengthened. "Then shall ye know," says the prophet, 'if ye follow on to know the Lord.' The men sit down, and Jesus begins to dispense His blessings. And thus by their act of obedience, their faith becomes enlightened.

6:10c *So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.*

- Jesus administered everything in an orderly way. Yet, they had to come under Jesus' order to receive Jesus' miraculous provision. The ones who came under Jesus' order would soon be filled to the full.
- Our blessed Master has glorious leisure, because he is always punctual. Late people are in a hurry; but he, being never late, never hurries. (Spurgeon)
- This is another beautiful line in the picture (cf. the five loaves in verse 9), for five is ever the number which speaks of grace, that is why it was the dominant numeral in the Tabernacle where God manifested His grace in the midst of

Israel. Five is four (the number of the creature) plus one—God. It is God adding His blessing and grace to the works of His hand.

6:11 *When He had given thanks:*

- Jesus only had a few loaves of bread and a few fish, but He was determined to give His Father thanks for what He did have.
- For five little cakes and two sprats Christ gave thanks to the Father; apparently a meagre cause for praise, but Jesus knew what he could make of them, and **therefore gave thanks for what they would presently accomplish. 'God loves us,' says Augustine, 'for what we are becoming.'** Christ gave thanks for these trifles because he saw **whereunto they would grow.** (Spurgeon)

6:11 *Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated.*

- The miracle resided in the hands of Jesus, not in the distribution. Little is much in His hands.
- A moment ago, they belonged to this lad, but now they belong to Christ. 'Jesus took the loaves.' He has taken possession of them; they are his property. (Spurgeon)
- The multiplication of the food was obviously not done with great fanfare. This is so true that we aren't told specifically where the multiplication happened. It seems to have happened as Jesus broke the bread and fish and distributed them to the disciples. It was not the integral loaves or integral fishes that were multiplied, but the broken portions of them. (Trench)
 - Most everyone ate and was filled, but had no idea that a miracle was happening.
 - **The disciples did not do the miracle; they simply distributed the miraculous work of Jesus.**
- Bread comes from grain, which has the power of multiplication and reproduction within itself. But when it is made into bread, the grain is crushed, making it "dead" – no one ever multiplied wheat by planting flour. Yet Jesus can bring life from death; He multiplied loaves of bread made from dead, crushed grain and from dead fish.
- Jesus relied on the labor of the disciples in this great miracle. He could have created bread and fish in the pocket or bag of every person, but He didn't. Jesus deliberately chose a method that brought the disciples into the work.
- Jesus refused to miraculously make bread to feed Himself in the wilderness temptations; but He did for others and with others what He would not do for Himself.
- Perhaps He is ready to use you—weak, insignificant, and ignorant though you be—and make you "mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). But mark it carefully, it was only as these loaves and fishes were placed in the hands of Christ that they were made efficient and sufficient!
- Here we are taught, again, the same lesson as the first miracle supplied, namely, that God is pleased to use human instruments in accomplishing the counsels of His grace, and thus give us the inestimable honor and privilege of being "laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9). It is the happy duty of every child of God to pass on to others that which the Lord in His grace has first given to them. Yea, this is one of the conditions of receiving more for ourselves.
- **These five loaves (by a strange kind of arithmetic) were multiplied by division, and augmented by subtraction.**

6:11 *as much as they wanted:*

- God's supply was extravagant, as much as any of them wanted. All ate until they were completely satisfied.
- For the significance of this story we must bear in mind that the figure of eating and drinking is widely used in the Old Testament. It is a figure of prosperity...and it is often used of the blessings the people of God would enjoy in the Promised Land. (Morris)
- As much as they wanted also included the little boy who gave the five loaves and two fish. **The boy himself ended up with more than he started with. It certainly was an adequate lunch for himself; but he gave it to Jesus and He it turned into an all-you-can-eat buffet for the boy as well.**
- **We are never impoverished, but always enriched by giving to others. It is the liberal soul that is made fat (Prov. 11:25). We need never be anxious that there will not be enough left for our own needs. God never allows a generous giver to be the loser. It is miserliness which impoverishes.**

6:12 *And when they had eaten their fill:*

- Jesus was generous, giving everyone as much as they wanted. This was a remarkable miracle, and some think that the disciples should have (or could have) anticipated that Jesus would do such a thing.
- Old Testament passages warn against doubting God's provision: Yes, they spoke against God: They said, "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" (Psalm 78:19) 2 Kings 4:42-44 is an example of God multiplying barley loaves, though this miracle of Jesus was on a much greater scale.
- Though the disciples did not understand or anticipate the miracle, Jesus invited them to participate in it. They distributed the miraculously multiplied bread and fish. Without their work, no one would have been fed.
- **Jesus demonstrated to them the giving character of God – the same character God desires to build within us. Proverbs 11:24 says, *There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty. This bread was multiplied as it was "scattered."***
- **Christ doesn't just barely meet needs; he abundantly supplies all that we want. When Jesus fed the 20,000, everyone was satisfied and there were 12 baskets full of leftovers.**
- "When they were filled"—what a contrast is this from the words of Philip, "That every one of them may take a little'? The one was the outpouring of Divine grace, the other the limitation of unbelief... Christ had fed them from His own inexhaustible resources, and when He feeds His people He leaves no want behind. Christ, and He alone, satisfies. His promise is, "He that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).
- **When Jesus supplies, it's never too little. He never runs out. Jesus loves to go above and beyond not only what we can ask but even what we can think (Eph 3:20). Jesus has never yet run into a problem he can't solve. No wine at the wedding. No problem. No food in the wilderness. No problem. No life in the tomb. No problem. When you follow Jesus, you never reach a dead end.**

6:12b *Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost. So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.*

- Jesus was generous, but never wasteful. Jesus wanted to make good use of everything.
- The fragments are not the half-eaten morsels and crumbs which might well be left for birds and beasts, but the broken portions which He had handed for distribution. (Trench)
- The term used for 'basket' (kophinos) usually denotes a large basket, such as might be used for fish or bulky objects. (Tenney)

6:14 *When the people saw the sign that he had done: The way Jesus provided bread for a multitude in the open air (something of a wilderness) reminded those men of how God worked through Moses to feed Israel with manna in the wilderness.*

6:14b *they said, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!"*

- Moses predicted the coming of the Prophet they expected: The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear. (Deuteronomy 18:15) **If the coming Prophet was to be like Moses, it made sense that he would also feed the people miraculously as Moses did.**
- **This crowd was willing to support Jesus so long as He gave them what they wanted – bread. It's easy to criticize how the crowd loved for Jesus for the bread He gave them, but we often only love Jesus for what He give us. We must also love and obey Him simply for who He is – Lord and God.**
- A rabbi of a later date is credited with the observation that 'as the first redeemer caused manna to descend, so will the last redeemer cause manna to descend', and the general idea seems to have been current in the first century. (Bruce)

6:15 *Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.*

- Christ is sufficient not only for physical needs, but especially for spiritual needs. But later (6:26-27), Jesus rebukes them because they were only interested in filling their stomachs. They had no concern about the food that endures to eternal life. Even so, today people come to Jesus because they need physical healing or they need a job or they

need Him to solve some pressing problem. He can meet those needs and He often does. But He wants us to see that we all have a deeper need: We need to be reconciled to the holy God. Jesus provided the only way for that to happen by giving Himself on the cross (6:51). No matter how great your sin may be, Jesus is more than sufficient to forgive your sin and save you from God's judgment.

CHRIST USES INADEQUATE PEOPLE TO MEET THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE.

Jesus could have looked around the crowd for the obviously rich and appealed to them for the funds to feed the crowd. He could have asked those with plenty of food to share. But instead, He used people who were painfully inadequate to meet this overwhelming need. If you think that you're adequate or competent to serve the Lord, you're not ready to serve Him.

Someone asked Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, "Do you really expect to make an impact on that great land?" "No, sir," Morrison replied, "but I expect God to." Hudson Taylor, who followed in Morrison's footsteps, said, "All God's giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on God being with them." God only uses inadequate people.

WHEN CHRIST USES YOU TO MEET THE NEEDS OF OTHERS, HE ALWAYS PROVIDES A BASKETFUL OF LEFTOVERS FOR YOUR NEEDS.

Unlike the manna, which spoiled if they gathered too much, in this miracle the Lord directed the disciples to gather the leftovers, so that nothing would be wasted. We should learn from this to be frugal with what the Lord supplies. Even though He can provide far more than we need, we shouldn't waste it. But this also shows how the Lord provides for those who serve Him. There were 12 disciples and there were 12 baskets full of leftovers.

BURNOUT

We hear a lot about "burnout" today, especially among pastors and missionaries. While we all need adequate rest and time off, if we're feeling burned out in serving the Lord, it's likely that we've been trying to meet others' needs in our own strength. We're trying to feed the multitude with the 200 denarii that we don't have, and it isn't sufficient even for everyone to have a little.

CONCLUSION

If you've never tasted Christ as the living bread to give you eternal life, then that is your main need. Your main need is not for Jesus to heal you or give you a job or provide you with a mate. Your main need is to come to Jesus for eternal life. Just as you eat bread to sustain your physical life even though you don't understand exactly how it works, so you need to trust in Christ for eternal life. He promises (John 6:35), "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and He who believes in Me will never thirst."

If you have trusted in Christ, my concern is that you offer yourself to Him to use to meet the needs of others. We always have many ministry needs in the church. Some are behind the scenes, servant-type jobs. But also, the Lord wants to use you to give out the bread of life to others, whether to fellow believers or to those who don't know the Savior. Don't live for yourself. Live to be used of God and you'll be satisfied with a basket full of the Living Bread for yourself.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5000 appears in all four gospels, and as we go on you'll see how all four gospel writers leave question-raising details that are filled in by one another in startling fashion in this story.

“When I first read through the Gospels forensically, comparing those places where two or more gospel writers were describing the same event, I was immediately struck by the inadvertent support that each writer provided for the other. The accounts puzzled together just the way one would expect from independent eyewitnesses. When one gospel eyewitness described an event and left out a detail that raised a question, this question was unintentionally answered by another gospel writer (who, by the way, often left out a detail that was provided by the first gospel writer).

This interdependence between the accounts could be explained in one of two ways. It may have been that the writers worked together, writing at precisely the same time and location, to craft a clever lie so subtle that very few people would even notice it at all. The second possibility is that the Gospels were written by different eyewitnesses who witnessed the event and included these unplanned supporting details; they were simply describing something that actually happened.” (Cold Case Christianity, Kindle Location 3156)

“One of the most important tasks for a detective is to listen carefully when multiple eyewitnesses provide a statement about what they observed at the scene of a crime. It's my job to assemble the complete picture of what happened at the scene. No single witness is likely to have seen every detail, so I must piece together the accounts, allowing the observations of one eyewitness to fill in the gaps that may exist in the observations of another eyewitness. That's why it's so important for eyewitnesses to be separated before they are interviewed. True, reliable eyewitness accounts are never completely parallel and identical. Instead, they are different pieces of the same puzzle, unintentionally supporting and complementing each other to provide all the details related to what really happened.” (Cold Case Christianity, Kindle Location 3177)

To see this fascinating discussion fleshed out, go to: <http://tiny.cc/feed5000>