

“What Have You Done for Me LATELY?”

Mark 8:1-13 ¹

Back in June, we considered Jesus’ “feeding of the 5,000” in Mark 6, and we reminded ourselves that this miracle is a powerful affirmation that God is able to meet great need even when our resources are meager. Further, this miracle demonstrated that Jesus not only meets our needs, but meets them with generous measure.

The ten to fifteen thousand people on that occasion (the 5,000 only counted the men) had not only enough, but as much as they wanted. By this miracle, God showed us that if we offer God whatever we have, however limited, God is able to give it back to us with a spiritual potential that we never dreamed it could convey.

Now, in chapter 8, we come to “the feeding of the 4,000,” and I’ve been surprised to find that I’ve never preached on this miracle before. This time, Jesus and His disciples were on their way back to Galilee after visiting the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, and great crowds—of Gentiles, mostly—continued to accompany their journey.

As best we can reconstruct the timeline, it appears that in our text, Jesus and His company may have been on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee, still in a Gentile area, when, at some unspecified location not far from the Sea, Jesus taught their accompanying crowd for three days. Trying to teach *anything* to a large crowd for three days straight with no notes and no *PowerPoint* is rather beyond my ability to imagine, but this seems to have been the situation.

It may also have been that this large group of some 4,000 people (this number does include everyone) had been traveling with Jesus for several days, and everyone was coming to the end of their provisions. In any event, Jesus became concerned about the welfare of the crowd, and mentioned the problem to His disciples. I don’t know whether you and I would have been any better, given the same circumstances, but the disciples—even after having seen the “5,000” fed—were clueless about how to proceed.

Some think that these two miracles are differing accounts of the same, singular, miracle; but there are many reasons to think that these are separate events. For example, whereas all four Gospels include the 5,000, only Matthew and Mark include the 4,000. As you can see from this chart,² the differences between the two events are many and striking. And Jesus referred to both miracles as He talked with the disciples afterward (Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 8:20).

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on November 26, 2017. Parallel passage is Matthew 15:29-39.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

²

5,000	4,000
At Bethsaida	In the Decapolis
Sat on the grass	Sat on the ground
Jesus was seeking rest	No mention of seeking rest
A storm followed	No storm followed
The crowd was from nearby	The crowd was from a distance
The crowd was mostly Jewish	The crowd was mostly Gentile

In any event, after He had fed the crowd, Jesus and the disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee to the region of Dalmanutha. We don't know where that was, but it was on the Jewish side of the lake, back into the territory of the Scribes and Pharisees, who wasted no time in showing up to ask Jesus "*for a sign from heaven*" (Mark 8:11). Now, of course, eight chapters into Mark's Gospel, the Pharisees have seen plenty of "signs from heaven" already, and it is from this request that today's title comes: "**What have you done for me . . . LATELY?**"

The feeding of the 4,000 focuses much more on "bread" than on "loaves and fish," but it's still about eating and about leftovers, with both of which I expect we've all had some experience this week. This week has also been about giving thanks, and I want to continue that consideration this morning.

Think for a moment about your favorite food. That might or might not be turkey and cranberry sauce. It might be steak, or curry, or meatloaf, or apple pie with ice cream. Tim Chester, in his book *A Meal with Jesus*,³ pointed out that God could have left us with just manna, as the Israelites ate in the desert for those forty years. Manna got the job done.

But, no! God gave us a vast and wonderful array of foods. The world in which we live is far more delicious than it actually has to be, and this abundance and variety is evidence of God's goodness, creativity, and generosity toward us. We don't actually *need* the superabundance we enjoy, but God gave it to us out of sheer exuberance and grace, and we do well to notice and to be grateful.

Richard Twiss, a Native American pastor, pointed out that among the Yupik (Eskimo) people of the western coast of Alaska, the community is careful to remember the sacrifice animals make—not so voluntarily, perhaps—to feed us. In consideration of and in gratitude for this sacrifice, the bones of a chicken, for example, are not given to dogs, nor are they thrown away. The bones of animals that have been used for food are burned, or buried, or returned to the place from which the animal was taken, because, in their view, one of the most important things about eating animals is gratitude and respect.⁴

Some of that might be a bit "over the top," but the idea of eating—anything, really—with gratitude and respect makes a lot of sense. Just being grateful, in fact, is good for your health.

Researchers have repeatedly documented that "an attitude of gratitude" lowers blood pressure, improves immune function, and facilitates better sleep. Gratitude lowers inflammation, creates improved heart rhythms, relieves depression, and reduces fatigue. People who keep gratitude journals consume fewer calories. They have fewer stress hormones. Grateful people are more patient. Gratitude has the opposite effect of stress.⁵

10-15,000 fed	4,000 fed
Crowd had been there 1 day	Crowd had been there 3 days
5 loaves and 2 fish	7 loaves and a few fish
Disciples objected to cost	Disciples objected to scarcity
Extra gathered into 12 small baskets	Extra gathered into 7 huge baskets
Recorded in all four Gospels	Recorded only in Matthew & Mark

³ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus* (Crossway, 2011), pp. 67-68.

⁴ Richard Twiss, in a 2012 sermon, cited in Ken Wystma, *Pursuing Justice* (Nelson, 2013), pp. 134-135.

⁵ Lauren Dunn, "Be Thankful: Science Says Gratitude is Good for Your Health," *TODAY* (5.12.17); Jessica Stillman, "The Cure for Impatience—Gratitude," *Inc.* (4.7.14).

On the other hand, evidence is mounting that complaining causes brain damage. Some research indicates that exposure to just thirty minutes of negativity—which includes watching television—actually destroys neurons in the part of the brain that does problem solving (the hippocampus).⁶ Do I have your attention yet?

I've quoted Denzel Washington's comments on gratitude before, but he apparently keeps saying these things, because others quote him quite often. This quote apparently comes from a 2015 banquet: "Give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. Put your slippers under your bed at night so that you'll have to get on your knees to retrieve them in the morning. And while you're down there, give thanks to God. A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere."⁷ Seems to me that's pretty good advice.

I'll bet you've seen the "Life Is Good" shirts and clothing. You may even have some. But you may not know that Bert and John Jacobs, the brothers who cofounded this \$100 million company, grew up the youngest of six children in a lower-middle-class family in Boston.

When Bert and John were in elementary school, their parents were in a terrible car accident in which their father lost the use of his right hand. In the years that followed that accident, their dad became a bitter man, but their mom, Joan, continued to believe that "life is good." Every night, as their family sat at the dinner table, Joan asked her six children to tell her something good that had happened that day.

"As simple as that was," Bert and John recall, "that changed the energy at the table, in the room, in our family, and in our lives. Mom taught us that being happy isn't dependent on your circumstances. Gratitude is a courageous choice you can make every day, especially in the face of adversity."⁸ That's pretty good advice, too.

Jesus famously talked about human hearts and minds as "soil" (Mark 4:1-9), and Margaret Visser has called the disposition to be grateful the "soil" of the spirit.⁹ Like literal soil, the "soil of the spirit" can be "cultivated." Gratitude can be "grown." In contrast, an ungrateful spirit is hard and dry, producing death, not life. People in Europe often speak of poor soil as "ungrateful soil."

We remember William Bradford, the Pilgrim governor and spiritual leader, chiefly for his leadership of the first Thanksgiving celebration in the "New World," but his gratitude didn't stop there. Thirty-seven winters later, Bradford fell ill, and by May 1657, it was clear that death was near.

Cotton Mather, the famous Pilgrim preacher, noted that as Bradford's death drew closer, a sudden and marvelous change came over his friend. "He seemed, like Paul, to be wrapped up into the unutterable entertainments of paradise," Mather wrote. The morning before his death, Bradford gathered his family to tell them that "The good Spirit of God has given me a pledge of happiness in another world and the first fruits of God's eternal glory."¹⁰

⁶ www.preachingtoday.com

⁷ Jeannie Law, "Denzel Washington: God has 'Faith in Me,'" *Christian Post* (11.12.15).

⁸ Natalie Walters, "Brothers who cofounded a \$100 million company say this question their mom asked every night at dinner is what inspired their business," *Business Insider* (12.17.15).

⁹ Margaret Visser, *The Gift of Thanks* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), pp. 327-328.

¹⁰ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower* (Penguin, 2007), p. 189.

As Bradford understood, it is to God that our gratitude really belongs, and Michael Reeves has suggested a helpful metaphor by which to experience this gratitude. In his book, *Delighting in the Trinity*, Reeves compares two ways to look at God. First, there is the common view that God is the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. Reeves contends that if God is The Ruler and the problem is that I have broken the rules, the only salvation God can offer is to forgive me and treat me as though I had kept the rules. Then he offers the following analogy:

But if that is how God is (if God is primarily the Ruler), my relationship with Him can be little better than my relationship with any traffic cop. Let me put it like this: if some fine cop were to catch me speeding and breaking the rules, I would be punished. If he failed to spot me, or if I managed to shake him off after an exciting car chase, I would be relieved. But in neither case, would I love him.

And even if, like God, the officer chose to let me off the hook for my law-breaking, I still would not love him. I might feel grateful, and that gratitude might be genuine, but that is not at all the same thing as love. And so it is with the “divine policeman”: if salvation simply means God’s letting me off and counting me as a law-abiding citizen, then gratitude (and not love) is all I have. **In other words, I can never really love the God who is essentially *The Ruler*. And that, ironically, means I can never keep the greatest command: to love the Lord my God.**

But then Reeves offers another way to think about God, the way offered by our Lord Jesus, the **Son** of God:

If we follow Jesus, we follow a path that ends happily and in a very different place, with a very different sort of God. The fact that Jesus is “the Son” really says it all. Being a Son means Jesus has a Father. **The God Jesus reveals is, first and foremost, a Father.** “*I am the way and the truth and the life,*” Jesus says. “*No one comes to the **Father** except through me*” (John 14:6). That is who God has revealed himself to be: not first and foremost Creator or Ruler, but **Father**.¹¹

This seems to me to be a crucial difference.

The Bible tells us that the mercies of our Father in Heaven “*never end. They are **new every morning***” (Lamentations 3:22-23). And Mark Batterson pointed out that “Today’s mercy is different from yesterday’s mercy and different from the day before that or the day before that. Just as the flu vaccine changes from year to year, God’s mercy changes from day to day. Our sins today are different from yesterday’s sins, and God’s mercy changes to cover our sin . . . if we will allow it.

“If you’re twenty-one years old, this means that God has granted you at least 7,665 unique mercies. At forty-two, it’s over 15,000. At retirement, its 23,725 unique mercies. Are you feeling grateful yet?”¹²

In another of his books, Mark pointed out that “You may feel as if you are sitting still right now, but it’s an illusion of miraculous proportions. Planet Earth is spinning around its axis at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour. Every 24 hours, planet Earth pulls off a celestial 360.

¹¹ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (IVP Academic, 2012), pp. 20-21.

¹² Mark Batterson, *IF: Trading Your “If Only” Regrets for God’s “What If” Possibilities* (Baker, 2015), p. 61.

“We’re also hurtling through space at an average velocity of 67,108 miles per hour. That’s not just faster than a speeding bullet. It’s 87 times faster than the speed of sound. So even on a day when you feel like you didn’t get much done, don’t forget that you did travel 1,599,793 miles through space! To top things off, the Milky Way is spinning like a galactic pinwheel at the dizzying rate of 483,000 mph.

“If that isn’t miraculous,” Mark wrote, “I don’t know what is. But when was the last time you thanked God for keeping us in orbit? Or for one of the 23,000 breaths you take every day?”¹³ Or for the fact that your body is able to digest and process all the food you ate this week?

Not long after a young pilot intentionally destroyed an airliner full of people in the French Alps, a passenger flying from Spain to England handed a note to the pilot as she left the plane, thanking him for getting them to their destination safely. The pilot noted on *Facebook* that it was the first time in his career that a passenger had thanked him.¹⁴

So when was the last time that you thanked one of the people who make your life possible—the doctors, the nurses, the custodians, the maintenance people, the grocery store clerks? When was the last time that you thanked the people who have significantly affected the direction of your life? Have you ever written a letter of thanks to tell them? If they still live on This Side, there’s still time!

Seven is the biblical number of completion, and you have seven blanks in your worship order. This afternoon, I urge you to list seven people for whom you are especially grateful, and circle two of those names as persons to whom you will write letters of gratitude this week.

Don’t be a “What Have You Done for Me . . . LATELY?” kind of person, whether with respect to your heavenly Father or with respect to God’s children who are part of your life.

Cultivate an attitude of gratitude. You’ll be happier. You’ll live longer. The world will be a better place. And you’ll help God’s Kingdom come “on earth, as it is in heaven.”

Amen, and Amen.

¹³ Mark Batterson, *The Grave Robber* (Baker, 2014), p. 19; *All In* (Zondervan, 2013), p. 119.

¹⁴ www.preachingtoday.com