

Life Group Questions

Sep. 10th, 2023

Feeding a Fall Festival Crowd - Ray Harms-Wiebe - **Matthew 14:13-21**

To the Life Group leader: thank you for your ministry leading this Life Group. **Take time to review the questions, selecting those you believe will be most helpful for your group study.** You will not have time to use all the questions. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you as you lead, as you select questions, and as you guide the discussion.

Reconnect

Come together with these preliminary questions:

- How has God gifted you to serve Him?
- How will you serve Him this fall at Willingdon Church?
- Where has God placed you in the city? What is your role there?

Open in Prayer

Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the text, the questions, and each other.

Message Recap Questions

Review the message using these questions

1. What stood out to you most in this week's message?
2. What was the most meaningful thing you heard in the message? Why?
3. What questions are still lingering?

Questions

1. What did Jesus hear and why did He want to go be alone?
2. Do you view visible success or failure as proof of God's favor?
3. How do you respond when you face difficulty?
4. What is the crowd's response to Jesus trying to be alone and how does this show how the crowd views Jesus?

5. Based on how you pray, are you concerned more about what Jesus wants or what you want?
6. What does Jesus' reaction to the crowds reveal about His heart?
7. How can we have a similar heart of compassion?
8. Jesus obviously knows the disciples don't have enough food. Why did He tell them to feed the crowd?
9. When have you trusted God when your situation seemed impossible? How did God respond?
10. What does it say about the disciples when they told Jesus about the five loaves and two fish?
11. What has Jesus put in your hands?
12. How have you seen God use what you have for His glory?

Commentary

1. What did Jesus hear and why did He want to go be alone?

Feeding the 5,000+ is one of the most celebrated and well-known stories of Jesus' ministry. Feeding the 5,000+ and the resurrection are Jesus' only miracles that appear in all four Gospels. This is a high watermark in Jesus' ministry when thousands of people are miraculously fed.

It's important to note the context of a passage. In this case, quickly studying what happens before the crowd shows a few themes in Jesus' ministry, including rejecting/celebrating Jesus and why Jesus performs miracles.

This passage begins with "Now when Jesus heard this" (verse 13). Let's look at what came before.

In Matthew 13:53, Jesus goes to His hometown of Nazareth and teaches in the synagogue. Everybody knows Him. Of course, He's the miracle baby born some 30 years ago. He's been a sharp student God's Word for over 20 years (Luke 2:41-52). He turned water to wine in nearby Cana (John 2:1-11). He raised a boy from the dead in neighboring Nain (Luke 7:11-17). He also performed many miraculous healings, cast out evil spirits, and more not too far away. Stories of Jesus' exploits should make Him the hometown hero.

Instead of welcoming Jesus, they call Him out. They know Jesus' family and humble beginnings so they're "offended" (Matthew 13:57). The original Greek word is σκανδαλίζω (skan-dal-id-zo) where we get scandalized. Jesus leaves dishonored in His own hometown. Because the people didn't believe in Him, He didn't perform many miracles, either.

Mark 6:1-6 and Luke 4:16-30 also recount Jesus' rejection, with Luke including crowd attempting to murder Jesus. Imagine the neighbors you grew up with trying to kill you. Suffice to say, Jesus had a bad time in Nazareth.

Then in Matthew 14:1, John the Baptist also had a bad time, too.

John was very important to Jesus' life. John was one of Jesus' relatives (Luke 1:36). Even before John was born, he leapt inside for joy at the sound of Mary's voice (Luke 1:39-45). John was the messenger sent by God to prepare the people for Jesus (Matthew 3:1-3). John baptized Jesus, kicking off His ministry (Mat 3:13-17).

John was arrested by Herod Antipas. Herod had divorced his wife in order to marry his half-brother's wife, Herodias. John preached against this and was locked up. Eventually John was beheaded. His head was placed on a platter and handed to Herodias' daughter so she could show her mother. It's pretty terrible. After John's death, Herod hears about Jesus' growing ministry (Matthew 14:1-2) and thinks Jesus is John back from the dead.

This is a very turbulent time for Jesus. He was rejected by His own hometown, His relative was murdered not too long ago, and now a homicidal king might want to finish the job.

2. Do you view visible success or failure as proof of God's favor?

Success and failure are not indications of one's faithfulness to God. Both Jesus and John were faithfully obeying God's mission for them, yet both John and Jesus would die grisly deaths. Although this goes beyond the scope of these notes, it's a very good argument against prosperity theology.

3. How do you respond when you face difficulty?

Jesus leaves Nazareth to be alone. It's only until much later that we see Jesus finally gets time to be alone to pray (Matthew 14:23). A lot is going on and He needs to spend time alone with His Father.

Jesus' ancestor David also spent a lot of time alone to pray when he faced difficulties. Thankfully, God preserved many of those prayers in the book of Psalms.

We often respond to tragedy or chaos by finding comfort in other people, numbing ourselves with social media, or bottling everything up.

Have group members share what their default response often is. If they do confess what they do wrong, I hope that they can feel relieved that they're not alone. Encouraging and praying for the people that struggle.

4. What is the crowd's response to Jesus trying to be alone and how does this show the crowd's view of Jesus?

Jesus travels from Nazareth back to the Sea of Galilee. He gets sails to a desolate place, meaning in the middle of nowhere.

The crowds find out and, instead of giving Him space, pursue Him. Unlike in His hometown, the people around Galilee are very eager to see Him. Unfortunately, this reveals they aren't concerned about Jesus. All they care about is what Jesus can do for them.

Imagine wanting to be alone to process tragedy or to hide, but thousands of people come to get something from you. How would you respond?

5. Based on how you pray, are you concerned more about what Jesus wants or what you want?

6. What does Jesus' reaction to the crowds reveal about His heart?

Jesus meets a great crowd. We'll soon learn that there were thousands of people. Amazingly, Jesus puts His own needs aside not out of compulsion, but "compassion" (verse 14). In Greek the word for moved with compassion is σπλαγχνίζομαι (splangkhnid-zom-ahee), literally meaning to be moved in the bowels. He didn't simply mentally note compassion or sympathy towards the people, but had a physical, gut reaction. I'm sure most of us have felt the same when seeing a young child or small animal crying out for help.

Jesus knows He needs time alone for Himself, but He's moved to care for these people.

7. How can we have a similar heart of compassion?

It's obviously not healthy to completely ignore our own needs to serve others. We all need times of rest and restoration. We all need to be poured into as we pour into others. But for many Christians our experience with the church is one-sided. So often only a few people love and care, leading to burn out. Thom Rainer writes in *I Am a Church Member*, "With a country club membership you pay others to do the work for you. With church membership, everyone has a role or function. That is why some are hands, feet, ears, or eyes. We are all different, but we are necessary parts of the whole."

Our goal is for everyone in our life groups (and church) to have compassion and care for one another.

Here are some tips people can apply to adopt Jesus' compassion on the members of their group.

- Spend time seeing Jesus' love in the Gospels. Long ago one of my church members was a police officer. I asked him about the recent spate of vehicles hitting police cars parked on the highway shoulder. He told me that people drift towards where their eyes are looking without knowing it. It's easy for people to focus on the consumeristic society and drift there. We should follow the author of Hebrews and fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2).
- Remember the compassion Jesus had for us. Jesus saw our helpless estate and loved us so much that He died for us (Romans 5:8). We easily forget the love and compassion God had for us (Matthew 18:23-35; Luke 7:36-50).
- Find godly examples around us (1 Corinthians 11:1; 3 John 1:11). Most of us will never find ourselves in the wilderness with thousands of hungry people. But Jesus' compassion is alive and well in our church. Go see it in action and learn how we can apply it in our own contexts.
- Ask God to change our hearts. We may know what we want to be like, but we're powerless to change. We're like a canoe adrift in an ocean current. Only through the Holy Spirit can we change from selfishness to compassion (Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:16-25). We can pray for ourselves and also one another.

8. Jesus obviously knows the disciples don't have enough food. Why did He tell them to feed the crowd?

They are in the wilderness, away from any towns. For the crowd to hurry into those towns to find food quickly would be impossible. Not even Costco could feed this crowd (the average Costco serves less than 500 hotdogs a day).

This isn't the first time that followers of God have been tested this way. Moses became suicidal when the Israelites demanded meat in the wilderness (Numbers 11:10-15). Elijah asked a starving widow for the last of her food (1 Kings 17:7-16).

God often puts us in impossible situations so we will trust in Him and see Him work. He never points out their lack of money, abilities, or education as the reason for their failure. They feared for their lives (Matthew 8:23-27), sank into the water (Matthew 14:22-32), and failed to cast out a demon (17:14-20) because of a lack of faith. It's the same reason Jesus didn't perform many miracles earlier in Nazareth. People didn't put their faith in Him.

Jesus gives them an impossible task. Are they going to A) try to figure it out themselves, B) declare it's impossible and give up, or C) rely on Jesus?

9. When have you trusted God when your situation seemed impossible? How did God respond?

I'm sure all of us have faced innumerable situations where God puts us in an impossible situation. I'll be the first to say that I struggle to trust in God's good plan. God tells you to love that unlovable person in your life. (You know who I'm talking about!) God commands us to be sexually pure in a society saturated with easy to access pornography, hookup culture, and an anything goes attitude. God wants us to spend time abiding in Him while we're stretched so thin from external pressures of work, family and society while also trying to take care of our own mental and physical wellbeing.

Will we try to figure out how to figure it out by ourselves, declare it's impossible and give up, or rely on Jesus?

For life group members that are struggling to know how they can go to Jesus, here are a few suggestions:

- Pray. Encourage them to pray for their own situations. Have group members also pray for them. Charles Spurgeon famously declared that the prayer room was the powerhouse of the church.
- Spend time in God's Word. God's Word is alive and active (Hebrews 4:12). Also, by saturating yourself with God's Word, you can use it to fight when temptation hits (Psalm 119:11; Matthew 4:1-11).
- Build accountability. One of the beautiful privileges of the church (and life group!) is the ability to carry each other's burdens and restore each other when we stumble (Hebrews 6:1-2).
- Share stories about God's grace. Many Christians sadly think they're supposed to be perfect and that stumbling proves they've failed God and are unworthy. Let them see concrete examples of God forgiving sins and cleansing unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Tell them how God has shown you mercy time and time again. Don't despair!

10. What does it say about the disciples when they told Jesus about the five loaves and two fish?

We learn from John 6:9 that the disciples find a boy with five loaves and two fish. That shows amazing faith. Why waste Jesus' time with such an insignificant amount of food? Why bother? But it seems the boy thought maybe Jesus could somehow find a way to make it work. That's incredible faith.

Jesus takes this food and thanks God (John 6:11). The boy must have been so encouraged to see Jesus thank God in front of everyone for his contribution. Whether or not the bread and fish would make a difference, Jesus appreciated it.

Everyone has more than enough to eat with tons of leftovers. The final count is five thousand men. Including women and children it could have easily been over ten thousand happy, fed people.

Imagine how happy the boy must have been to see Jesus use His small gift to bless a huge crowd.

11. What has Jesus put in your hands?

12. How have you seen God use what you have for His glory?

Jesus gladly took the food and used it for His glory.

God has given all believers spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 7:7; 1 Peter 4:10) to serve the church. He's also given us our bodies, minds, skills, experiences, relationships, spheres of influence, and more. We tend to focus on how seemingly little we have, but God cares more about our hearts than what we can provide. God picked David's heart over Saul's (1 Samuel 1:1-13). Jesus praised the widow who gave a financially worthless offering (Mark 12:41-44). God's concern isn't the amount, but the heart behind it (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Although I really appreciate talented vocalists that can sing like songbirds or hit those harmonies on Sunday morning, I am most impressed by the terrible singers that give it 110%. Their pitch is way off and their rhythm is all wrong, but it doesn't matter. You can feel their heart overflowing with joy for the God that loves them and it is infectious.

Many congregants look up to our pastors and elders as Christian superstars, but I'm sure if you ask, they'll agree they're nothing special. They simply offered to God whatever He equipped them with. They'll tell you that God gets the credit for every successful event, moving sermon, or life.

To think that God can't use us is silly when we remember that God created the universe and sustains it with His infinite power (Genesis 1). He can literally do anything with or without us. Do you think your limitations will stymie God's plan?

Also notable is the fact that out of a crowd of thousands of people only one person, a child, offered his food. Statistically speaking, there must have been a lot of people with some food but thought it wasn't enough to bother Jesus with. We often think that faith requires age, but if you've spent enough time with children and youth, you've been blown away by their faith in God and what He can do through them. Don't let the younger members of your life group think they have any less potential than anyone else.

Encourage the group to take inventory of what God has given them and brainstorm ways that God can use your members to advance His kingdom.

- Spiritual gifts (e.g., serving, administration, teaching, encouraging)
- Passions (e.g., prayer, children's ministry, cooking, traveling)
- Material resources (e.g., a car, spare bedroom, used items in good quality, a lawnmower)

- Skills/talents/abilities (e.g., dance, decorating, accounting, swimming)
- Ability to see needs in the church (e.g., noticing lonely people in a crowd)

It can be awkward for someone to tell a group how gifted they are. Some may also have no idea. A great way to go through this exercise is to pick a person and have other group members point out what they've seen in that person. People are so encouraged when others affirm that God is working through them, especially when they didn't even realize it.

Choose Your Next Step

What next step will you commit to for the upcoming week (and beyond)?

Closing Prayer

A closing prayer is an effective way to point people back to our Loving Father as they seek to apply their new learnings throughout the week. Ask group members to share what they sense God calling them to. Pray for each other and commit to continue to do so during the week as people step out in obedience to God's leading.