

## No Turning Back- Living the surrendered life Lesson 6

I imagine if I were one of the band of 12 disciples, that Jesus would have worn me out. It seems like everywhere you turn, the 12 apostles are playing catch-up. Jesus is off curing lepers, casting out demons and brings a young girl back to life. Jesus is preaching and teaching. He's always on the go and it seems like his followers are doing just that...following behind and trying catch-up and keep up with Jesus. So, I imagine the words in Mark 6 were sweet music to their ears: **"Come with me to a quiet place and get some rest." (Mark 6:32b)** Little did the disciples know that their quiet retreat with Jesus would also include another 5000 people.

You know, right from the beginning of Mark 6, Mark leads his readers to hope for great things to come from this band of 12. I mean these guys are commissioned by Jesus and are given abilities and encouragement to engage society with the message of the coming reign of God. It's exciting! Mark gives us hope that these guys finally got it! Unfortunately, by the end of Mark 6, Mark's readers no longer suffer from that naïve and optimistic assessment of the disciples and it becomes rather hard to believe that the coming kingdom of God would come on the heels of these guys.

A mile out from the eastern shore you can hear the enormous crowd. As you get closer you cannot tell the difference between the Sea of Galilee and the sea of faces. Tired from a preaching circuit and ready to spend some quiet time with Jesus, it's pretty tempting to complain that you need some time off, especially when you see thousands of people crashing your little retreat with Jesus. You remember when in 3:20 the crowd gathered at the house and the disciples did not even have a chance to eat... it's the same thing here in 6:31. Although excited about all that God was able to do with these disciples in this preaching tour that has just ended, the disciples come with grumbling tummies only to be met by more people!

But Jesus looks at the crowd and has-- compassion.

The same gut feeling that characterizes Jesus in Mark 1:41 at a one-on-one conversation between him and a leper is the feeling Jesus has in 6:34 when the boat scrapes onto the shore: **"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things."** (Let's read again)

**Mark 6: 34-44** By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. Send the people away so they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see."

When they found out, they said, "Five--and two fish."

Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who

had eaten was five thousand.

What an amazing site. I have been in a few settings with that many people and I can only imagine the coordination and energy it would take to handle that large of a crowd. One misstep and you've either got a lot of hungry people left on your hands or a riot ready to break out. I know I'd have a difficult time trying to organize all that. I seem to even struggle with how much Halloween candy to give out. Last Monday we had 60 or more children engulf our home with their sweet tooth guiding them the whole way. It was great! I started handing out all kinds of candy. Of course Helen wasn't there to keep me sane, so before I knew it I was calling Helen on the cell phone begging her to stop at the store and pick up more candy! She couldn't believe it.

What a setting for Jesus.

But if you look closely at chapter 6, you see that Mark is playing with us a little. Just when you think this passage is going to tell us about Jesus, Mark flips the story back on the reader. This story is about us and the task Jesus assigns those who follow him. This story of the feeding of the 5000 is not about Jesus as much as it is a further elaboration on the cost of following Jesus.

Mark 6:1-6 tells us about Jesus in his hometown as a prophet without honor as a way to illustrate what we should expect as authentic disciples. Life is not the same and you cannot expect to go home (there's no turning back!). Mark 6:7-29 tells us about what preaching repentance might cost us, namely our lives. Mark 6:30-44 is about the crowd that will gather around those who seek the Lord and your responsibility to them.

I think Mark is trying to show us something vitally important. Preaching repentance and living your faith is still not enough. Like Jesus, you must have compassion upon those who have no idea what they are looking for. You must have compassion on the leftovers of society. You must have compassion on those who cannot seem to find their way home.

In his compassion, Jesus is teaching the crowd when the sun begins to set. Some of the men are beginning to yawn while others "amen" over the growling of their stomachs.

The disciples—yet again illustrating how not to be—have all the compassion of a jealous child. Not really understanding what they are preaching, the disciples start trying to manipulate Jesus to do their will. They see Jesus as a good speaker, but not terribly effective at public relations. They try to coach him a bit: "Send them away. They're hungry."

Notice what Jesus says... "You give them something to eat."

I imagine at this point the disciples are ready to join Jesus' siblings back at the house in Mark 4. Maybe Jesus has lost his mind? "How are we going to feed these people who seem to follow us no matter where we go. How are we going to feed them with five loaves of bread and two fish? That won't even feed the thirteen of us, much less 5000 people!!

Next thing you know, everyone is sitting cross-legged in the cool green grass watching the sun kiss the endless horizon of the sea enjoying the best fish sandwich any of them had ever put in their mouths.

But then Mark adds a one-word commentary at the end of 6:42 when he tells us that everyone had something to eat, but even more, they were “satisfied.” The same idea of “being satisfied” concludes the book of Isaiah where the kingdom of God is compared to a nursing mother who satisfies her children. And if you have ever been around a fed infant after hours of screaming, you know the meaning of the word “satisfied.”

Jesus fed 5000 plus people and still had leftovers. They had extra baskets of food because everyone who ate that day felt something many of them had probably never felt before: They felt “satisfied.” The story is all the more interesting when considering its little subtleties like the men sitting on the “green grass” in the middle of the desert. Sounds to me like Jesus is doing more than serving a meal. Here we see Jesus making good on his first words from Mark 1:15. Here on the cool green grass with a mouth full of food, the kingdom is near.

Now if we read this story looking for a stand-alone message we could go to the other three Gospels—all of which have a version of the feeding of the 5000—and we could combine it to say that **Jesus can give you what you really need**. Or maybe the message could be something to the effect that **just when you think God cannot pull off a miracle, He can still work among us**. Or perhaps we could even sermonize about giving our **small gifts to Jesus and how he can make them bigger**.

But if you listen to where Mark places this story in his story, the feeding of the 5000 in Mark is a prophetic story.

From one angle, it is a prophetic story because it reminds us that only God can do original work among us. Only God can set the standard for what loving one another is really all about. But there is a more stinging critique in the middle of the story.

The disciples return at the beginning of 6:30 from their preaching journey no more in tune with the work of the kingdom than they were when they left in 6:7-13. Here on the shore with Jesus and the fish sandwiches, all the disciples can hear is the baaing of hungry sheep. But Jesus sees these sheep as ones who need a shepherd. And guess who Jesus wants the shepherd to be: **It’s not him**. He wants his disciples to get to the point where they can be the shepherds, not as originators, but shepherds who follow the example of *the* Shepherd. Do you remember what he told them in 6:37 – **“You give them something to eat.”** This is not a mere teaching moment.

Jesus is telling his disciples—and all disciples who will come after, including us—that to follow Jesus is not an individual endeavor. You will never be *the* Shepherd. But that does not excuse you from being *a* shepherd in the likeness of Christ.

Mark wants us to know that to follow Christ authentically may cause you to be rejected by those you love and by those you offend. As if that were not threatening enough, he heaps on the burden of giving people something that will satisfy them; not watered-down-feel-good mush that they could pick up in the self-help section at the Christian bookstore, but real, genuine stuff that will challenge them to give their lives, not just their Sunday mornings.

When you see those who wander around this world like sheep without a shepherd, where is your compassion? The other Gospels may tell this story in such a way that suggests we are the sheep searching for a home. Mark, however, does not have time to take us through the story slowly. He quickly assumes that the reader is ready to throw caution to the wind and follow Christ. If that is the

case, to follow must also mean to extend yourself. You do not get a vacation. You do not get to retire. You do not reach a point where you say, "I'm just going to let someone else do it now." No. As long as the baaing of hungry sheep fills the air, Jesus calls you to be a shepherd.

In some ways, the feeding of the 5000 is a relief story following the tragic moment of John the Baptist's execution. It is the relief in the story for us to relax for a moment in the face of their ignorance to simply hear a story about Jesus as one who has compassion upon those who cannot seem to get it. This is a comforting story about Jesus, the one who has compassion.

But Mark will not let it rest there, and neither can we. As we overhear Jesus' words to his disciples, we know we are being equipped for an impossible mission.

*"You give them something to eat."*

If I try, I will fail. But if I go with Jesus to a place of quiet rest filled with the sounds of the baaing of hungry sheep, as long as it is God who sends and God who feeds, I can go anywhere in the name of Jesus, and those who eat the true bread of life will be satisfied.

A seeker is asking... Can I imagine myself among you?

Let's pray...