

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO JOHN
17. Lessons from Loaves and 2 Fishes
John 6:1-14

Jesus performed many, many miracles during His public ministry.

John 20:30–31 (ESV) ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book;

How many?

John 21:25 (ESV) ²⁵Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

D.A. Carson helps us get our heads around such a statement

Doubtless this may be taken as a pardonable exaggeration, but the stylistic and theological care of the Evangelist throughout the work argue decisively against the suggestion. If in v. 24 the Evangelist has already alluded to the Prologue (cf. notes above), it is best to think he is doing so again. The Jesus to whom he bears witness is not only the obedient Son and the risen Lord, he is the incarnate Word, the one through whom the universe was created. If all his deeds were described, the world would be a very small and inadequate library indeed.¹

But here's the deal — John gives to us his eyewitness account of only SEVEN carefully curated miracles.

³¹but these (seven) are written **so that** you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). The Gospel according to John (p. 686). Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

Each of those miracles were packed with insight into the nature of Jesus and the nature of our relationship with Him. So much so that he didn't call them miracles — he called them *“signs”*.

This morning we come to the fourth of those seven signs. It is probably the most famous miracle in the ministry of Jesus. It is such a significant identifier of the nature of Jesus that it is recorded in all four gospels — and it is the ONLY miracle recorded in all four gospels.

Let's turn in our Bibles to **John 6**.

JOHN 6:1-14 After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. ²And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. ³Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”

John 6:1-2 After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.

After this — As much as half a year may have passed since the previous event recorded in John. ² So a number of events would have transpired between the 3rd sign performed by Jesus — the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda and the 4th sign John records here in John 6.

The record of Luke 6:1-9:10 and Mark 3:1-6:30 fill in this gap. There were epic teaching moments during this period of time including “the Sermon on the Mount” (Matt. 5-7) and the parables of the kingdom (Matt.13).

Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias.



²And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick.

² Köstenberger, A. J. (2004). John (p. 199). Baker Academic.

Literally — The multitude “kept following” Jesus because they “continually saw” the signs that he “habitually did”.³ This reinforces the fact that John was an eyewitness to countless miracles performed by Jesus and that he was deliberate and Holy Spirit inspired in selecting only seven.

THIS IS HUGE — These SIGNS were pointing men and women to the true identity of Jesus. But we are going to see at the end of this event that most of them were following Jesus on their terms. They followed for selfish reasons. For most of them, Jesus was a means to an end. But the minute they are confronted with the reality of Jesus: i.e. — He is Lord and they are servant — they walk away.

THAT is super relevant to our 21st century world. 21st century men and women are made of the same stuff of those 1st century men and women. They were not so different from a lot of men and women in churches today who have an anthropocentric/egocentric theology where **man** is Lord and **Jesus** is servant. “Follow Jesus Christ for fun and profit!” As long as Jesus can make them happy, they will follow Him.

Here’s Mark’s backdrop to this account

***Mark 6:30-33** The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹And 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. ³²And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them.*

I have to tell you that on my first trip to Israel one of the things I most wanted to see was the physical backdrop for this moment in the life of Jesus — To see the topography and the distance and the path that this crowd would have taken as they ran after Jesus along the top end of the Sea of Galilee. It was so amazing to see it for the first time!

³ Morris, L. (1995). The Gospel according to John (p. 302). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

By straight line across the Sea of Galilee it is about four miles from Capernaum to the eastern shore. Jesus and the disciples got into the boat to sail from Capernaum to deserted area near Bethsaida, which is near to the place where the River Jordan flows into the north end of the Sea of Galilee.

³Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand. ⁵Lifting up his eyes, then, and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him,

We are told that the Feast of the Passover was at hand. Many Jews living in the region of Galilee were making their way up to Jerusalem for to celebrate Passover. All roads leading south would have been crowded with people on foot or donkey. (Think Labor Day weekend traffic!). Those who lived at the top end of the Sea of Galilee would have traveled to Jerusalem by crossing to the east side of the Jordan at Bethsaida — travelling south on the east side of the Sea of Galilee. The Jordan continues to flow out of the south end of the Sea of Galilee. They would have continued on the east side of the Jordan valley — and then crossed back over to the west side of the Jordan River near Jericho. The way was much longer, but by taking that route they were able to avoid the territory of the hated Samaritans.

⁵... Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”

LESSON #1 — THE HEART OF JESUS

The other Gospels tell us that Jesus and the disciples needed rest. But look at how quickly Jesus turns from His own needs to the needs this multitude (with all of its mixed motives!)

Mark 6:34 *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

The phrase **HE SAW** takes back to the healing of the paralyzed man in John Chapter 5. John tells us (John 5:26) that **Jesus saw** the man who had been paralyzed for 38 years.

HERE'S THE DEAL — As we look at God on mission we see that he was so observant of the space He was in. We take our cues from our King. LOVE involves looking at others — not to judge — but to see needs — serve and be a part of the work of God making broken lives whole.

The rest that Jesus and the disciples needed is denied by a crowd comprised of curious, self-serving people.

How does Jesus respond? No impatient glare — No reluctance as the prospect of a quiet time vanishes. He looks at the gathering crowd and His FIRST response is that of compassion! His FIRST question was not, “*How can we get out of here?*” — it was, “*How can we provide for them?*” And think about it — they weren't even hungry yet!

CHECK THIS OUT — They hadn't given any thought for what they would eat! But Jesus did! This is so HUGE — Jesus cared for the careless! His heart was looking ahead at their necessities.

QUOTE: Alexander Maclaren — *Thy mercy, O loving Christ! needs no more than the sight of human necessities, or even the anticipation of them, swiftly to bestir itself for their satisfaction and their supply.*

The Gospel isn't just our ticket to heaven. It brings us into the story of God! On this side of heaven, we're called to be ambassadors of our redeeming King. Here's how Paul framed it in a letter to the 1st century Christians in Philippi

Philippians 2:3–5 (CSB) ³*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves.*
⁴*Everyone should look not to his own interests, but rather to the interests of others.* ⁵*Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus,*

Jesus doesn't rest from mercy. He doesn't rest from compassion. Jesus is *the same — yesterday, today and forever*. Before we call, He answers.

This miracle struck each of the authors in a radical way and I believe that a great portion of WHY this moment struck all of them has to do with **what they saw in Jesus — and of themselves** looking back on this moment.

We can only know our own hearts by setting them alongside the heart of Jesus. In this moment we see the response of Jesus — the HEART of Jesus — alongside the response of the disciples. He saw the crowds coming. Jesus was moved with compassion. The multitude wasn't even hungry when they got to Jesus, but Jesus was already thinking of providing for them. And then He began to teach them MANY things. **THAT** is Jesus. **YOU** and **I** are accurately portrayed in the response of His disciples.

Mark 6:35-36 And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat."

SEND THEM AWAY! Oh, how we need Jesus!

So in this miracle we get a glimpse into the **selfless** and **compassionate heart** of Jesus — and by contrast — a look into our easily **selfish** and often **cold** hearts.

God does not save us to leave us the same. From the moment of conversion, He is at work in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. He desires that our *way of being* would express His way of being. So much so that we would be a merciful people.

Eugene Peterson — *"The Church is to be a colony of heaven in the country of death".*

So much so that the first thing that would come to people's minds when they think of us would be: *Those people are compassionate, **very** compassionate, **full** of compassion! That person is compassionate, **very** compassionate, **full** of compassion!*

LESSON #2 — THE WRONG WAY OF PROCESSING PROBLEMS

⁵... Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?”

FIRST — The very nature of the question INFORMED Philip what was first and foremost in the heart of Jesus.

SECOND — This was a TEST!

⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.

Jesus wasn't prompting an extemporaneous brainstorming session with Philip. Jesus already knew what He was going to do.

Deuteronomy 8:2 ²Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands.

It's not as if the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites was a 40 year-long test and at the end God was shocked — *Dear me, they've failed!* God KNEW they would stumble around the wilderness for 40 years failing every test BEFORE there ever was a nation of Israel. God tested the nation of Israel to PROVE to the ISRAELITES how defective their faith was. THAT is why God tests us! He puts problems before us that PROVE us.

The purpose of Jesus' question was to

SHOW Philip that Philip had a defective understanding of the NATURE of Jesus and the NATURE of work in the Kingdom of God.

TEACH Philip about the utter INSUFFICIENCY of human resources in the work of God and the absolute SUFFICIENCY of God.

TEACH Philip about DEPENDING on Jesus no matter how things pencil out against human resources.

Jesus was like the director of a movie or a Broadway production, setting the stage for this moment of revelation! In essence Jesus was sticking Philip with the lunch tab and letting Philip choose how he was going to pay for it.

It was an impossible situation, but that's how Jesus wanted it. Here was a perfect opportunity to test Philip. The essence of the test was — *“Has Phillip learned to trust Me?” “Will he focus on My ability or will he be paralyzed — overwhelmed by the impossibility?”*

We know from the opening of John's Gospel that Philip was Bethsaida born and bred (John 1:43-44). If anyone knew how and where to get enough to feed these people it would be Philip. Besides that — Philip had a knack with numbers.

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

He knew the need, and he knew the area. He knew there wasn't a Nugget or a Whole Foods or a Safeway or a Winco or a Costco around. Philip “did the math.” The numbers said that they would need the equivalent of 8 month's wages! And even that would not provide bread enough to satisfy the hunger of all the men, women, and children (Matt. 14:21). By **every calculation** and **every variable** Philip just knew that Jesus' plan COULDN'T work!

DON'T MISS THIS — Philip never answered the question in **VERSE 5** of *“Where will we get enough?”* He answered — *“We don't have enough money!”* Phillip — like many of us — was a Calculating Pessimist. The right answer is

JESUS IS ENOUGH!!

The last stanza of a poem written by Paul Tripp tells us why Jesus is enough

*Who
is this mighty one?
Jesus Christ
Son of God
Son of Man
Word in the Flesh
Promised Messiah
Sacrificial Lamb
Victorious King
Lord of Lords
Immanuel
God with us!
God for us!
God in us!
Hallelujah!*

HUGE LESSON — Difficulty must always be measured by the one doing the job! Is it God's work? If it is, the work WILL get done. It doesn't matter

A woman asked G. Campbell Morgan, "*Do you think we ought to pray about even the little things in life?*" Dr. Morgan, in his typically understated British manner replied, "*Madam, can you think of anything in your life that is big to God?*" When you think about it like that, it puts things in proper perspective — WHAT can possibly be BIG to God / or HARD for God? There are 200 billion stars in our Milky Way galaxy. The galaxy is about 90,000 light-years across. Light travels at a speed of **186,000 miles/second**, or **700 million** miles an hour. **1 year** = 365 days x 24 hours/day = 8,760 hours. **1 Light year** = 8,760 x 700 million = 6 trillion, 132 billion miles. That means our galaxy is 90,000 x 6 trillion, 132 billion miles.

Isa. 40:12 *measures the heavens with the span*

There is NOTHING too BIG to God — NOTHING too HARD for God.

HERE'S THE POINT — Philip's understanding of the shortfall was CORRECT. Philip's CONCLUSION was INCORRECT! His conclusion should have been —

Jesus — this is YOUR idea. This is WORK that YOU want to do.

We don't possess sufficient resources to do what is in your heart for these people. But that's YOUR problem — and since it's YOUR problem, it really isn't a problem at all!

There is NOTHING that God has done for ANY Christian at ANY period of history that He's not able to do for you. Philip's answer should have been, "There's no bakery around Lord, but You don't need one."

When God is going to do something radical He begins with a difficulty. When He's going to do something really radical, He begins with impossibility!

THE NARRATIVE SHIFTS from the calculating pessimist to another of the disciples.

⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?"

LESSON #3 — THE RIGHT THING TO DO WHEN FACING PROBLEMS

We were introduced to Andrew in **Chapter 1**. He was one of the first to follow Jesus. We remember that Andrew is NOT a prominent figure in the New Testament. He didn't write his own epistles as Peter, John or Paul.

Andrew was the guy who was always bringing people to Jesus. Andrew brought his brother, Peter, to Jesus. Here he connects this little boy with Jesus. Andrew has no food. He himself has no solution.

BUT - He finds this kid and brings that kid in contact with Jesus.

It resulted in a day that boy would never forget and that we should never forget. Thank God for those men and women who introduce others to Jesus so a great work can be done. Very often they are not seen nor recognized. More on Andrew in a bit.

LESSON #4 — WHAT MINISTRY REALLY IS

Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, about five thousand in number.

That would make this crowd upwards of 15,000-20,000 men, women and children! REMEMBER what God used to feed THAT multitude!

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

The other accounts give the detail that Jesus gave the loaves and the fishes to the disciples to distribute.

All of us have to learn - and I am in the process of learning - that in whatever capacity the Lord calls us to serve Him ' we are utterly dependent upon heaven's resources. Now how in the world can YOU and I make a difference in anybody's life? We're sinners saved by grace. The thing we have to learn is that He is the manufacturer. We're just distributors. We have nothing (= no thing) in and of ourselves to give.

The world around us is STARVING for truth — DYING to know real LOVE and LIFE. The needs in just this room are simply beyond our resources to meet.

But look at this moment — It was not their hands that made it increase and multiply, but their Master's. It was His almighty power that provided an unfailing supply. It was their work to receive humbly, and distribute faithfully.

QUOTE: J.C. Ryle — *The servant of the Lord has no power to put away sin, or impart grace. His whole business is to receive the bread of life which his Master provides, and to distribute it among the souls among whom he labors. He cannot make men value the bread, or receive it. He cannot make it soul-saving, or life-giving, to any one. This is not his work. For this he is not responsible. His whole business is to be a faithful distributor of the food which his Divine Master has provided; and that done, his office is discharged.*

So also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.”

LESSON #5 - JESUS IS CREATOR GOD

¹³So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten.

THIS IS HUGE STUFF — In healing the sick, and raising the dead, something was repaired or restored that had already existed. BUT — in feeding this crowd of 20,000 with five loaves and two fishes — food was called into existence that did not exist before.

HERE’S THE POINT — It is so awesome to know that Jesus can fix that which is broken (broken heart) — or build up that which is ruined (marriage, relationship, business) — heal that which is sick (headache or cancer) — strengthen that which is weak (fear or unbelief). But because He is God who created the heavens and the earth, He can do even greater things — He can call into being that which has never yet existed — and He can call it into existence out of nothing (Ex Nihilo).

We need to bear this in mind when we are about to give up all hope of someone getting saved. When every ounce of reason and everything you’ve seen with your eyes tells you that someone’s heart is too hardened to ever come to Jesus — **John 6** tells us that Jesus can *create* as well as *renew*. NOTHING is impossible for Jesus who can create a new heart!

LESSON #6 — BRING SOMEONE TO JESUS

Andrew **brought to Jesus** a little boy who played a significant part in the economy of God in this famous of miracles.

The point for us is this — Bring people to Jesus. We can never know what will come out of it when we bring someone to Jesus.

PARENTS — We can't even begin to guess at what mighty things our children might one day do in serving the Lord.

CHILDREN'S CHURCH WORKERS — You can't even begin to guess at what radical ways the Lord might use a child that you bring to Jesus

There is a tale of an old German schoolmaster who, when he entered his class of boys in the morning, used to remove his cap and bow ceremoniously to them. When asked why he did this, he answered, "*You never know what one of these boys may some day become.*" One of those boys was Martin Luther.

Andrew did not know what he was doing when he brought that lad to Jesus that day, but we know that he was providing material for a miracle. BRING SOMEONE TO JESUS.

LESSON #7 — WHAT JESUS CAN DO WITH THE INSIGNIFICANT and INSUFFICIENT

Look at WHO stepped forward and WHAT the Lord used to feed a multitude —

A little boy — By everyone's standards the little boy was INSIGNIFICANT in a multitude of 5,000 men.

By everyone's standard the little boy brought to Jesus that which was INSIGNIFICANT and INSUFFICIENT.

5 barley loaves (the size of a hamburger bun) — Barley bread was the cheapest of all bread and was held in contempt. The philosopher Philo writes that barley products are "suited for irrational animals and people in unhappy circumstances".⁴ Barely bread had "lower gluten content, low extraction rate, less desirable taste, and indigestibility" rendering it "the staple of the poor in Roman times"⁵

⁴ Köstenberger, A. J. (2004). John. Baker Academic.

⁵ Ibid

2 Fishes — The fishes would be no bigger than sardines. Pickled fish from Galilee were known all over the Roman Empire. In those days fresh fish was an unheard-of luxury as there was no means of transporting it any distance in an edible condition. Small sardine-like fish swarmed in the Sea of Galilee. They were caught and pickled. The boy had his little pickled fish to help the dry barley bread down. By man's reckoning — Andrew was dead on when he said *but what are they for so many?*

Here is what made that boy SO SIGNIFICANT. He was a poor kid like any number of kids in the crowd. But he did something that set him apart — He went to Jesus — and gave his lunch, poor as it was, to Jesus. **WORSHIP is bringing yourself and your barley and pickled fish to Jesus!**

When mom packed his lunch that morning, that lunch was INSIGNIFICANT and INSUFFICIENT. It became SIGNIFICANT and SUFFICIENT in the hands of Jesus!

It's like that through all Biblical history. Dust is insignificant — But in the hands of the Creator it became man. The Jawbone of donkey is INSIGNIFICANT. It is INSUFFICIENT to fight a battle with — But in the hands Samson was able to slay 1,000 Philistines. A shepherd's rod is INSIGNIFICANT — But Moses used it powerfully. A sling and 5 smooth stones are INSUFFICIENT for battle — But David killed the great threat of Israel, Goliath, with that sling and 1 stone.

HUGE POINT — A little, when surrendered to Jesus, becomes powerful! Don't think that what you have is useless because it is insignificant. You may not have the gifts and talents of others. But don't forget to figure God into the equation. What makes a person great is THAT PERSON in the hands of Jesus, THAT GIFT in the hands of Jesus. You will find that its more than enough for the task He calls you to do.

DON'T MISS THIS — The reverse of that is also true: If you have great wealth it is totally insignificant to God unless it's surrendered to Him. Are you talented? That talent is absolutely insignificant unless in His hands.

Have you studied hard for a professional position in society? That skill may be valuable to the world but it is insignificant unless yielded.

QUESTION: Do YOU see yourself as insignificant? If so you are looking at your littleness and NOT God's greatness.

The mathematics of a miracle:

5 loaves + 2 fish = not enough

5 loaves +2 +Jesus = MORE THAN ENOUGH

Without Him – nothing

With Him — everything

LAST LESSON —

Jesus could've pulled this miracle off without any of this. He could have lifted His hands and commanded manna come down. He could have instantly created a loaf of bread in everyone's pocket. Instead He shows His desire to work through the insignificance of others to get His work done.

This miracle was a very important lesson for His disciples in light of a future NEED. Later — Jesus will tell these men to **"Go into all world."**

It would have been natural for them to respond with — **"What are we among so many?"** But **this sign** prepared them to be the means by which Jesus would bring the good news of His kingdom to the whole world. **This sign** revealed to them the truth about Jesus! **This sign** revealed to them the truth about their relationship to Jesus and His work! **This sign** revealed to them the means by which Jesus would bring the good news of His kingdom to the whole world!

This sign taught them that the INSUFFICIENT becomes SUFFICIENT when it's in the hands of Jesus — blessed by Jesus — and BROKEN by Jesus.

This sign teaches **us** that when we place our lives into His hand — trust Him to bless us and receive His blessing are BROKEN by Him — that we become the vessels through which HIS sufficiency can flow to a needy world!

Our world is so desperate!

QUOTE: Bob Dylan (Hard Rain Fallin') —

*Oh, what'll you do now, my blue-eyed son?
Oh, what'll you do now, my darling young one?
I'm a-goin' back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin'
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty
Where hunger is ugly, where souls are forgotten....
Where black is the color, where none is the number
And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it*

CLOSE with two questions

QUESTION — What are WE going to do with this moment of revelation?
How are you and I going to respond to Jesus —

Jesus who is full of compassion

Jesus — who is full of care, knowing our need before we experience it;

Jesus — who can fix that which is broken (broken heart)

Jesus — who can build up that which is ruined (marriage, relationship, business)

Jesus — who can heal that which is sick (headache or cancer) —

Jesus — who can strengthen that which is weak (fear or unbelief).

Jesus — who can call into being that which has never yet existed — call it into existence from out of nothing (Ex Nihilo).

QUESTION — What are WE going to do with our lives; our loaves and fishes?

Is YOUR LIFE in His hands?

Are YOUR loaves and fishes — your time, talent and treasures — in His hands?

WORSHIP is bringing yourself and your barley and pickled fish to Jesus!