Mark Lesson 24 (2022)

**JESUS FEED THE FOUR THOUSAND IN DECAPOLIS**

(*Subtitle: “I Have Compassion for These People.”)*

Mark 8:1-10

Key Verse: 8:2

“I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.”

At first glance, Jesus’ feeding of the four thousand in today’s passage is similar to his feeding of the five thousand in Galilee (6:30-44). We wonder why Mark repeated a similar event. Honestly, I felt less motivated to study this passage, thinking it was just a repetition of the same event. Yet, I was wrong. If we consider the context of today’s event, especially the geological location and the specific crowd of people, we can better understand this event. Today’s event occurred near Decapolis, the Gentile region. The four thousand people Jesus fed in this event were a mixed crowd of Jews and Gentiles, predominantly non-Jewish. Jesus expressed his passionate affection for them by saying to his disciples, “I have compassion for these people.” Yet, his disciples didn’t understand the heart of Jesus. Considering the hostility and racial barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles in those days, what Jesus said and did in today’s passage is remarkable and sensational. This morning let’s delve into the heart of Jesus toward these people.

Look at verse 1. “During those days, another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said.” Mark does not explain what kind of crowd they were. But we can borrow from Matthew’s record, which states, “Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up to a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and laid them at his feet, and he healed them all. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel." (Mt. 15:29-31) Jesus had been traveling the Gentile regions, outside the borders of Israel, ministering to these people who were predominantly the Gentiles who worshipped multi-gods and idols, contrary to monotheistic Jews. Generally, the Jews, particularly the orthodox Jews, didn’t associate with pagan people and their cultures. Considering the disciples’ ethnic and religious backgrounds, we cannot say that the disciples digested Jesus’ ministry among the Gentiles well. I am sure they felt very uncomfortable and had many conflicted feelings and thoughts. They could not accept and embrace the Gentile people as their brothers and sisters because they had a lot of preconceived notions and ideas about the Gentiles. That was one of the primary reasons Jesus had to take this long journey with his disciples. Jesus wanted his disciples to overcome their deep-rooted ethnic pride and racial prejudices against non-Jewish people, which may take a long time and process (Pic#1). What did Jesus do?

Look at verses 2 and 3. “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way because some of them have come a long distance.” According to the Jewish religious traditions, the God of Israel hated the Gentiles, who were not in God’s covenants. To the Jews, the Gentiles were nothing but the object of God’s wrath and anger. Such thoughts led the people of Israel to have an exclusive view of life. Since they had been invaded and conquered by foreign armies, they hated the Gentiles. For example, when the Prophet Jonah was told to go to the city of Nineveh and preach the message of repentance, he refused to obey. He would rather die than have them repent and be saved (Jonah 4:3). That was the kind of their general attitude toward the Gentiles. But Jesus had compassion, not animosity, toward the Gentiles.

Jesus also verbalized his compassion in the presence of his disciples, “I have compassion for these people.” Let’s reread verses 2 and 3. “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.” The word ***“compassion”*** in Latin *“****Misericordia****”* means to suffer with. It means pitying someone who suffers. It’s like a mother’s broken and loving heart toward her sick or hungry child. Jesus felt the pain of hunger for these people and wanted to provide for their needs. In other words, Jesus saw them as his loving children, and he was determined to feed and nurture his children.

In the event of his feeding of the five thousand, we are told that Jesus had compassion for the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd (6:34). That’s compassion for spiritual needs. In Jesus’ statement in verses 2 and 3, physical needs are highlighted. It does not mean that Jesus didn’t care about the spiritual needs of these people. Jesus said to his disciples in John 10:10 that He is the Good Shepherd who had come to give us life and have it to the full. Jesus cares for our physical, emotional, mental, professional, and spiritual well-being.

When we read the Old Testament, we are often shocked to see how God destroyed certain pagan cities and nations and commanded the people of Israel to destroy them mercilessly. At the same time, we also read about the God of compassion. For example, Psalm 111:4 states, “He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and compassionate.” Lamentation 3:22 and 23 says, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” It seems that the God of Israel is compassionate toward his people, the people of Israel. Good for them! Yet the question remains, “*Is the God of Israel compassionate for non-Jewish people or even non-believers?”*

The answer is **“Yes.”** It seems that Jesus is demonstrating God’s compassion for non-Jewish people. When Jesus said, “I have compassion for these people,” he was saying that God does not hate anybody simply because they are not Jewish. God loves all humankind and all his creations, including animals. There seemed to be a gap between the true God and the understanding of traditional Jewish people about him, including the prophet Jonah. So, he expressed his deep compassion for non-Jewish people in Nineveh by saying to Jonah, “And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left- and also many animals.” (Jonah 4:11)

Interestingly, Jesus didn’t mention their deep-rooted prejudice and ethnic pride. Instead, he talked about his having compassion for these Gentile people. I wondered why. It does not mean that Jesus ignored people’s internal problems. My tentative conclusion is that having compassion toward someone is the best approach to overcoming deep-rooted relational issues. People have all different kinds of problems. Some people are hard to deal with and bear. Without compassion, it’s hard to maintain a proper relationship, even between spouses.

These days, we use the word ***“Empathy”*** a lot. When Jesus said he had compassion for the Gentile people, he meant that he empathized with them. To empathize with someone means more than just feeling sorry. It means putting oneself in the position of others who suffer.

So, to help his disciples put themselves in these people's position, he explained their dire condition in detail, saying that these people would starve to death or collapse on the way unless they were provided with their physical needs. It seems Jesus tried to teach his disciples to develop emotional intelligence. (Pic#2) Emotional intelligence is an essential spiritual quality for spiritual leaders and mature Christians. What is emotional intelligence? Emotional Intelligence is the ability to identify our own emotions and those of others, to self-motivate ourselves, and to know how to monitor our emotions and those around us. Unlike IQ, which is almost set, EQ (Emotional Intelligence) can be developed and improved through education and training. In some sense, the core of Jesus’ discipleship training is to develop EQ, which is the essential spiritual quality to be able to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our day-to-day life and ministry. **(Empathy & EQ)**

How did the disciples respond? Look at verse 4. “His disciples answered, ‘But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?’” Their answer was negative because it’s impossible to get enough food in this remote place. But they made some progress. On the previous occasion, they said to Jesus, “Send the people away!” (6:36), but not this time. Instead, they said, “But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?” Their response was a little better but not good enough. At least, they seem to be aware of the situation in which they could not avoid the part of their responsibility. Yet they faced a serious dilemma that they didn’t see the possibility of having enough resources to feed this large crowd of people. So, they, looking at Jesus, shrugged their shoulders. (Pic#3)

How did Jesus help them to overcome their dilemma? Look at verse 5. “‘How many loaves do you have?’ Jesus asked. ‘Seven,’ they replied.” Jesus asked them the same question when he fed the five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. (6:38) That occurred in Galilee, perhaps several months ago. Even though they answered, “Seven,” the disciples seem to have forgotten the great miracle and remained oblivious about Jesus’ supernatural power and wisdom.

Jesus could’ve fed these people simply by asking God to send manna from heaven, as he did in the wilderness (Ex. 16). It could have been straightforward, and his disciples and people would be amazed. Yet, he didn’t do that. Instead, he asked his disciples to get involved by bringing what they had, and they bought seven loaves of bread.

Verses 6-8 describe what Jesus did to feed the crowd of hungry people through the small resources his disciples brought. Look at verses 6-7. “He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and **given thanks**, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he **gave thanks** for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.” The description of Jesus feeding these people was not so different from the previous miracle.

However, we noticed that Mark repeated the phrase “Jesus gave thanks” for the resources his disciples brought, seven loaves and a few small fish. He was holding those small resources, and Jesus thanked God. Jesus sincerely appreciated what his disciples brought and fed the four thousand people through them. It indeed was a God’s miracle.

But let’s think a little further. We know that God’s miracle can happen in many ways. He can bring manna and meat from heaven. He can open the way through the Red Sea, for he is almighty. He can also perform many supernatural miracles. Indeed, those miracles are fantastic. But what Jesus wanted his disciples to learn is that God’s miracle can happen in our day-to-day life through our small resources.

When we face challenging situations in our personal lives, we feel overwhelmed and fall into a spiritual dilemma. We might ask God for a miracle, but we fail to bring small resources through which God can bring his miracle into our lives and ministry. The fact that Jesus gave thanks for the small resources reminds us that we need to find our small resources, see their great potential, and bring them to Jesus. God’s miracle cannot happen without our contribution, no matter how insignificant it may be.

Look at verses 8 and 9a. “The people ate and were satisfied. Afterward, the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand were present.” The disciples collected seven basketfuls of leftover pieces of bread and fish (Pic#4). It shows that Jesus’ provision was more than enough.

Today’s miracle was done near the Decapolis, a Gentile territory. The 4,000 people Jesus fed in today’s passage were a mixed crowd, primarily Gentiles, whom the Jews didn’t like and kept their distance from. Yet, Jesus expressed his loving-kindness and mercy on them by openly saying, “I have compassion for these people.” Indeed, his compassion for all humankind is epitomized through his suffering and death on the cross. Through his death on the cross, the wall of hostility is broken. Now, through Christ Jesus, who rose from the dead, everyone can have access to the kingdom of God regardless of their race, gender, age, socio-economic and political status. Christ Jesus’ work of redemption is unprecedented in history that he broke the walls of hostility due to differences in ideas, ethnicity, and religion. God’s compassion for all human races is a guideline of Jesus’ messianic ministry back in the early century, now and forever. John 3:16 states it. “For here is the way God loved the world – he gave his only, unique Son as a gift. So now everyone who believes in him will never perish but experience everlasting life.” (TPT) Everlasting life is God’s gift for us through Christ Jesus, who died for our sins and rose from the dead. Eternal life is available now and forever for those who put their trust in him.

Having said this, we must remember that acknowledging the truth of the gospel is one thing and how we practice our faith in the gospel is quite another. The kingdom of God is not just a matter of head knowledge. It’s a matter of practice of our faith through which we experience God’s living presence in our day-to-day living and beyond. We need to develop empathy and Emotional Intelligence as mature Christians.

Living in this troubled world, we no longer feel, and it’s unpredictable. But we don’t need to be anxious. We need to be confident in God’s faithful love for us. Even if heaven falls, we should be sure that we can be more than conquerors in Christ Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us (Gal. 2:20). I want us to close our sermon by reading Romans 8:37 together, “No, in all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”

May we believe that neither death nor life, neither angel nor demons, neither the present nor the future, can separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus. Let us also remember that God’s miracle can happen when we bring our small resources to him. May we strive to be more compassionate, forgiving, generous, and genuine. May we grow to be emotionally intelligent Christian disciples.