

# The Nations Glorify the God of Israel!

*Matthew 15:29–39*

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Pastor Trent Eastman

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## Opening

When is the last time you were truly grateful — not just thankful for something good that happened, but genuinely undone by the fact that you received something you had no right to ask for? That experience is at the heart of our passage today. It is my prayer that as we look at it together, you will not only grow in your understanding of Jesus and his ministry, but that you will be drawn to him more deeply because of his great mercy and grace toward you.

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## Introduction

For a little over two years, on the northwestern edge of the Sea of Galilee region, Jesus has been ministering to the Jewish people, the children of Israel. He has taught in their synagogues, healed people, called twelve disciples, and proclaimed the Kingdom of Heaven, inviting people of the house of Israel to repent and believe in him. But when we get to chapter 14, something happens. A tipping point is reached, and three things come together at roughly the same moment.

First, Jesus reaches the highest point of his popularity — thousands are following him. Second, Herod Antipas kills John the Baptist, creating a politically charged environment in which the people want to overthrow Herod and make Jesus king by force. And third, Jesus has just fed five thousand men plus women and children with only five loaves and two fish, and after the meal, twelve baskets of bread were collected. Remember that number.

Everything is now set up. Jesus is standing at a crossroads. He is more popular than he ever will be, massive Jewish crowds are following him, and there is a political movement afoot to make him king. If there was ever a moment in time for Jesus to step forward as the Conquering Messiah, now is the time. So what does he do?

He gets in a boat and leaves the Jewish area of the Galilee and enters the land of the Gentiles, thus beginning his ministry to the nations. Chapter 15 opens with a Jewish delegation from Jerusalem sent to investigate Jesus, but then, in verse 21, we read:

“*Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*”  
(*Matthew 15:21*)

There, he heals the daughter of a Canaanite woman and describes her faith as great. The district of Tyre and Sidon is the land of the ancient enemies of Israel — and that is exactly where Jesus goes to minister. This is the beginning of his ministry to the nations.

The interaction between Jesus and this woman is hard for us to understand; it sounds very harsh and dismissive. The woman asks for Jesus’ mercy to heal her daughter, and he responds: “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (15:24). And when she draws even closer, begging for mercy, he says to her, “*It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs*” (v. 26).

As hard as this is to hear, the point is clear. People who live outside of a covenantal relationship with God have no standing, no right, to come before the Lord and ask for anything. As a Canaanite, this woman has no standing to come before Jesus and make any request. But — and here is her great faith — she knows that the Lord is merciful and gracious, and it is based upon who he is, not who she is, that she comes to him. She responds: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table*” (15:28). Jesus calls her faith great and heals her daughter.

That exchange was not only a personal miracle. It was the beginning point of something new. The bread of life was beginning to fall from the master’s table beyond the borders of Israel. That is what our text today is about. Matthew 15:29–39 is about Jesus, the bread of life, going out to the nations — to those who exist outside of Israel’s covenant with God.

Yes, Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Yet the whole purpose of the house of Israel was to be a light to the nations and to lead them in worship and in glorifying the Lord. In this ministry to the nations, Jesus is now fulfilling the very purpose for which Israel was called. With this in mind, let us enter our passage.

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## **A New Mountain, A New Crowd**

“*Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee.*” (*Matthew 15:29*)

Matthew does not tell us exactly where Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee. Fortunately, the Gospel of Mark fills in the detail: “*Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis*” (Mark 7:31).

The Decapolis was a large region of ten Greek city-states, about three hundred years old at this point in history. The people of the Decapolis despised the Jews and rejected everything Jewish. They worshiped the Greek and Roman gods and followed the Greek and Roman ways.

Are you starting to see the pattern? Jesus gets in a boat and leaves the Jewish shore. He arrives first at Gennesaret, then travels to Tyre and Sidon, and now he moves to the Decapolis. And notice what Jesus does here, in this thoroughly Gentile, Greco-Roman region:

“*He went up on the mountain and sat down there. And great crowds came to him.*” (Matthew 15:29–30)

Does this remind you of anything? Go back to the beginning of Matthew. After Jesus’s birth, his baptism, his temptation, and the calling of his disciples, this is how he begins his ministry among the lost sheep of Israel: “*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him*” (Matthew 5:1).

Matthew 15:29 is a near-repeat of Matthew 5:1. The difference is not what Jesus did, but the crowds who came to him. These crowds in Matthew 15 are not Jewish — but Jesus welcomes them, and so they come:

“*Bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the crowd wondered — they marveled, they were in awe — when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing.*” (Matthew 15:30–31)

These miracles of mercy and grace are the signs of the coming Kingdom — the signs that the age of redemption has arrived — and they are happening on a Gentile hillside. Jesus is pouring himself out among the nations. And look at what these Greek, Roman, and Canaanite Gentiles do in response: they glorified the God of Israel.

If these people were Jews, that line would simply read “they glorified God,” just as the Jewish crowds did after the paralytic was healed in Matthew 9:8. But these people are not of the house of Israel. Nevertheless, that is the God who is worshiped. Not their gods, but the Lord God. Gentiles, lifting their voices to glorify the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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## **The Purpose of Israel — and Its Failure**

This worship of the God of Israel by the nations of the world was, in fact, the very purpose of the house of Israel. The Lord’s choosing of Israel was not a rejection of all other nations in the world. He chose Israel *for* the world. His calling of Abraham was never meant to be a rejection

of the nations but the beginning of their rescue. Here is how it reads in Genesis 12:2–3, when Abram was first called:

*“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2–3)*

All the families of the earth shall be blessed — not all the families of Israel, but of the earth. And this refrain of being blessed to be a blessing is repeated throughout the Old Testament. It is the foundation of the covenant that God makes with the people of Israel. In Exodus 19, he calls them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And what does a priest do? A priest mediates. A priest stands between God and those who do not yet know him. Israel’s entire calling was outward-facing. They existed not to keep the blessing locked away, but to give it away.

Psalm 67, which we studied Wednesday evening, says it this way:

*“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you!” (Psalm 67:1–3)*

God’s plan was never to bless Israel and leave the nations in darkness. The plan was always to bless Israel so that through her, all the nations would come to know the God of Israel.

But Israel failed. This is the story of the Old Testament. The chosen covenant people of God did not live up to their calling. Sometimes they chased after the gods of the nations and became indistinguishable from the world around them. At other times they swung to the opposite extreme — they became so focused on the law as a badge of identity that they forgot it was supposed to be a light. The law became like a clay jar placed over a lamp, keeping the light in rather than letting it shine out.

This is exactly why Jesus was so angry at the Pharisees. He was not angry because they disagreed about a few traditions. He was grieved because their entire posture toward the law had turned the purpose of Israel upside down and backwards. Their religion had become a wall, keeping the light in and blocking the world out.

So now here is Jesus — the true Israel, the faithful Son, the one in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen — and he goes up on the mountain in Gentile country, and the nations stream to him, and they lay their broken bodies at his feet, and he heals every one of them, and in response, they lift their voices and glorify the God of Israel.

Jesus accomplished in one afternoon what Israel failed to do in a thousand years. He brought the nations to glorify the God of Israel. He is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. He is the Priest who finally mediates. He is the Light that finally shines into the darkness of the Gentile world. Every psalm that prayed for the nations to come to God, every prophecy that pointed toward this moment — it is all happening right here, on this hill, in the Decapolis. The God of Israel is glorified. The nations praise the Lord.

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## Compassion in the Wilderness

But our story does not end here. Look at what happens next:

*“Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.’” (Matthew 15:32)*

When Jesus says, “I have compassion on the crowd,” this does not mean polite concern or sympathy. This word for compassion — *splanchnizomai* — refers to a deep, gut-level, physical aching for another person. It is the word used for the father who sees his prodigal son coming down the road from a long way off and runs to him. It is the word used for the Good Samaritan who stops on the road to Jericho when everyone else has passed by. And it is the word Jesus uses here, standing on a Gentile hillside, looking out over a crowd of people who have no claim on him whatsoever.

These are not his covenant people. They do not carry the name of Israel. They have not been raised on the Torah. They have no standing before God based on anything they have inherited or achieved. They are simply a crowd of hungry, needy Gentiles who followed him into the wilderness — and Jesus looks at them, and his heart breaks for them, and he feeds them.

*“And the disciples said to him, ‘Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?’” (Matthew 15:33)*

Did they not just witness the feeding of the five thousand? We are so much like them. How often do we face a crisis in our own lives and choose to worry and stew over it, while giving little thought to the fact that God took us through a similar crisis only weeks or months ago? The God who was faithful in the past is the same God who is faithful in the present.

*“Jesus said to them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven, and a few small fish.’ And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.” (Matthew 15:34–38)*

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## **Twelve Baskets and Seven — The Arithmetic of Grace**

This second miracle of multiplying and feeding a hungry crowd appears very similar to the first one in chapter 14, but there are important differences between the two.

First, and most importantly, the crowd in Matthew 15 is Gentile, as opposed to the Jewish crowd in Matthew 14. The context of Jesus being in the region of the Decapolis makes this clear — and so does the different word used for “basket.” We cannot see this in English, but in the Greek, the word for basket in the feeding of the five thousand is *kophinos* — a basket used by Jewish people to carry kosher food. In this feeding of the four thousand, the word is *spyris* — a large, general-purpose Gentile basket. Matthew’s word choice is telling you exactly who is at the table.

There is another hint embedded in the numbers themselves. In the first feeding, twelve *kophin-oi* of food were left over. Why twelve? Because it was the house of Israel eating, and there are twelve tribes. Now look at the feeding of the four thousand: how many *spyrides* of food were left over? Seven.

Why seven? In the context of this passage and the narrative arc of the Gospel, here is my answer. The number seven in the Bible signifies wholeness or completeness. If the twelve baskets represent the twelve tribes — all of Israel — then the seven baskets left over from the feeding of the four thousand represent the nations of the world. I base this on Deuteronomy 7:1:

*“When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you.” (Deuteronomy 7:1)*

The seven baskets represent these Gentile nations and, symbolically, all nations. Jesus is in Gentile territory, feeding Gentile crowds, and seven baskets remain. The message could not be

clearer: the bread of life is not only for Israel. There is enough. There is more than enough. Twelve baskets for the twelve tribes. Seven baskets for all the nations. Jesus is Lord, and Shepherd, and Savior of the world.

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## Sent Back Into the Decapolis

“And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.” (Matthew 15:39)

Jesus sends the crowd away. He does not invite them to set up camp on the hillside. He does not let them build a monument to the miracle and live in the memory of it. He feeds them, and then he sends them — back into the Decapolis, back into the ten cities, back into their homes and their streets and their neighborhoods, giving praise and glory to the God of Israel.

This miracle at the end of Matthew 15 shows us something about the purposes of God. The bread of life is not only for Israel. The bread of life is given for the world. For God so loved the world that he sent the Son — even to the hungry, broken, empty-handed Gentile crowds upon a mountain — so that they too may believe in him and have life. And as they came to Jesus, so must we. We come to him not because we deserve a place at the table, but because Jesus, in his mercy, invites us.

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## Application

**First: the bread of life has been sent to all people — Israel and the nations — because of the great compassion and mercy of God.**

We are this Decapolis crowd. We too have no natural claim on the promises of God. We are, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:12, “*separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*” That is not a mild condition. That is a description of being utterly lost, spiritually hungry, with nothing to eat and a long way from home. But Jesus looked at you and said: *I have compassion, and I am unwilling to send them away hungry.* He looked at you in your lostness, and his heart broke for you.

That is why the Gospel came to you. That is why someone ever sat down with you and opened a Bible. That is why you are sitting in this room today. At the root of every conversion in the history of the church is this one sentence: “I have compassion on the crowd” — which is just another way of saying, “For God so loved the world.”

This compassion and love should undo us. Every time we are tempted to think that we came to faith because we were wise enough to respond, or humble enough to see our need, or spiritually sensitive enough to hear the call — this verse corrects us. We came to faith because he had compassion on us when we were hungry outsiders in the wilderness with nothing left.

**Second: just as Jesus looked upon people who had no covenant claim, no spiritual heritage, and no standing before God — with compassion — so too should we.**

Before we can fully obey the Great Commission, we need to see people as Jesus sees people. To see people this way means we stop looking at them as outsiders, or problems, or projects, but rather as hungry souls whom Christ loves and longs to feed. It means remembering that every person we pass is someone for whom the mercy of God is meant. Ask God to heal your eyes — not only to see him more clearly, but to see others as he sees them, with compassion.

**Third: just as Jesus sent the crowd away back into those ten cities, so too does he send us.**

Your Decapolis is specific. It has an address, a name, a face. Who are the people in your Decapolis — the places where you actually live and work and move — who have not yet heard that the bread of life is for them too? There are seven baskets of leftovers, which means there is always more than enough.

The bread has come down from heaven. It crossed the sea to find you. It climbed the hill to meet you. It broke itself open so that you would never go hungry again. Now he sends you — back into your Decapolis, back into your streets and your neighborhoods and your homes — carrying more than you could ever give away.

So go and give this bread of life away, all to the glory of the God of Israel.

Amen.