

The Beauty of the King and the Kingdom

Matthew 14:13–21

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Opening: Shrek and the Layers of Meaning

Possibly the funniest movie I have ever seen is *Shrek*. Maybe you have seen it. What made the film so brilliantly funny was not simply the surface-level story of an ogre and his talking donkey, but the way it played with fairy tale tropes that its audience already knew by heart. To truly appreciate the humor, you had to walk into the theater already carrying those original stories in your head. Remember when Donkey gets hit with fairy dust and begins to fly? Donkey shouts, “Hey, I can fly!” A little boy behind him echoes, “He can fly!” And the three little pigs chime in, “He can fly!” If you have never seen *Peter Pan*, that moment is completely lost on you. It is the viewer’s prior knowledge of classic fairy tales that allows *Shrek* to operate on multiple layers of meaning and humor simultaneously. Without that knowledge, the movie is still funny — but you miss so much of what is actually happening.

Scripture works in much the same way. The surface story is beautiful on its own terms. But when you know the Old Testament — its patterns, its promises, its recurring images — you begin to see layers you never noticed before, and the story opens up into something far richer than you first imagined.

This morning we are going to read one of the great stories of Jesus’ compassion in action: the feeding of the five thousand. The story itself is beautiful. But if you know your Old Testament, you will see other layers of beauty as well — specifically, the beauty of the King and the beauty of the Kingdom.

Introduction: The Context of Matthew 14

Matthew 14 opens with a horrifying story. John the Baptist has been executed at King Herod Antipas’ birthday banquet — a casualty of royal vanity and a rash oath made in front of an audience that could not be disappointed. Jesus hears the news of this evil act and grieves.

| *“Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.” (Matthew 14:13)*

What the Bible calls the Sea of Galilee is, by our standards, a lake — which means that people standing on the shore can watch where a boat is heading and race along the beach to meet it on the other side. That is exactly what they do. And so, in verse 14, we read:

| *“When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”*

Last week we paused on that verse — seeing Jesus, even in the depths of His own grief, turning outward in compassion to heal the sick. This morning we continue in the same passage to see what happens next.

The sun is now getting low. The day is ending. And the disciples, ever practical, come to Jesus with what seems like a reasonable suggestion.

| *“This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” (Matthew 14:15)*

It is a sensible idea. It may even come from a place of genuine kindness — concern for the people who have been out in the open all day, or perhaps concern for Jesus Himself, whose heart has been wrung out from the moment he received the news about John. Of course, it is also possible the disciples were simply hungry. Either way, sending the crowds away seems like the obvious move.

But Jesus has a different idea. He commands them to do the impossible.

| *“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:16)*

And so they bring Jesus everything they have.

| *“We have only five loaves here and two fish.” (Matthew 14:17)*

Matthew does not tell us where the loaves and fish came from, but the Gospel of John fills in the detail: it is Andrew — the disciple who is always finding people — who locates a boy in the crowd carrying a small lunch. Five loaves and two fish. A child’s meal. And this is what they bring to Jesus.

What happens next is one of the most familiar and beloved scenes in all of the Gospels.

“And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves 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 twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.” (Matthew 14:18–21)

What a beautiful story of our Messiah.

The Beauty of the King

Even if we read this passage at face value, without any reference to what came before it in Israel’s history, it reveals extraordinary things about who Jesus is.

We see the beauty of His compassion — that even when His own heart is breaking with grief, He sees people not as interruptions to His pain, but as souls dearly loved. Where another man might have said “not today,” Jesus said “come.”

We see the beauty of His humility — the King of heaven standing on an ordinary shoreline, sharing a boy’s lunch with thousands of ordinary people.

We see the beauty of His authority — with a word He organizes chaos, with a prayer He multiplies scarcity, and with His hands He transforms impossibility into abundance.

We see the beauty of His patience — rather than sending the crowds away in their need or shaming the disciples for their doubt, He tenderly provides for both.

We see the beauty of His provision — the disciples had *only* five loaves and two fish. Mark that word: *only*. Jesus calls them to bring their only to Him, and there, in His hands, their inadequacy becomes sufficiency.

We see the beauty of His wisdom — He does not simply do the miracle for the disciples; He invites them into it. He commands them to do the impossible, but only through trusting Him. *Bring me what you have. Then give to them what they need.*

And we see the beauty of His grace — no one had to earn a seat at this meal. There was no entrance requirement, no screening process, no test of worthiness. They simply came hungry, and He welcomed them. Five thousand men, besides women and children — the overlooked, the uncounted, the ordinary — all fed, all satisfied, all received by a Savior whose only instruction was to sit down on the grass.

Our King is beautiful. If this were all we saw in this passage, it would be more than enough. We could leave this morning encouraged that Jesus sees us, loves us, and provides for us. But there is more here. The more you know the story of God's people — the patterns and promises of the Old Testament — the more you begin to notice details in this story that are quietly but deliberately echoing older, deeper stories.

Reading the Layers: Old Testament Echoes

Notice the details: *a desolate place, bread in the wilderness, people organized into groups, twelve baskets, even five loaves*. These are not incidental features of the landscape. They are signposts pointing backward to another story — the story of God redeeming a people and forming them into a nation in the wilderness.

The Old Testament presents us with a fundamental problem: human works are corrupted by evil, and nowhere is that corruption more visible than in the kingdoms human beings build — kingdoms that glorify their rulers and oppress the vulnerable. The primary example of this in the Old Testament is Pharaoh, who enslaved the Israelites, worked them without mercy, and sought to eliminate their male children. Because of this evil, God sent a deliverer — Moses — to bring His people out of bondage. But the story does not end at the Red Sea. The Lord takes this redeemed people and crafts them into a kingdom unlike any kingdom the world had ever seen: a kingdom defined by His presence, His justice, His holiness, and His steadfast love. This kingdom was meant to be both a witness to the nations and a counterpoint to every earthly power that practiced unrighteousness.

The details in Matthew 14 are drawn directly from that wilderness story. In Exodus and Numbers, we read of the people living in the desert, being organized into groups, receiving miraculous bread from heaven, and being constituted as twelve tribes. The connections are not accidental. And if we read the parallel account in the Gospel of John, John leaves no doubt that we are meant to make them. It is in John 6 that Jesus explicitly identifies Himself as the greater Moses, and when the crowds ask for bread from heaven — just as their ancestors received manna — Jesus declares, *“I am the bread of life.”*

This means the deeper layer of meaning in Matthew 14 is not only the beauty of the King, but the beauty of the Kingdom. What is happening on that grassy hillside beside the Sea of Galilee is a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

The Beauty of the Kingdom

To see this clearly, we need to hold two scenes from Matthew 14 side by side. From verse 1 through verse 21, there are two kings — Jesus and Herod. There are two feasts — Herod's birthday banquet and Jesus' compassion feast. There are two different guest lists — Herod invites only the powerful and elite; Jesus invites everyone. And there are two very different outcomes — at Herod's feast, a prophet is executed; at Jesus' feast, the hungry are healed and fed.

What we are witnessing is a deliberate contrast between two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God. And in that contrast, the beauty of God's Kingdom comes into brilliant relief.

Consider the Kingdom's *accessibility*. Herod's banquet had a guest list of nobles, military commanders, and leading men of Galilee. Jesus' feast had no list at all. Five thousand men, besides women and children — the uncounted, the overlooked, the ordinary — all welcomed, all fed.

Consider the Kingdom's *abundance*. The world's kingdoms are limited by what can be seen and counted. "We have only..." But Jesus' kingdom operates by different mathematics. What appears to be a devastating shortage becomes, in His hands, more than enough. "Only" becomes abundance.

Consider the Kingdom's *compassion*. Herod's kingdom runs on power and self-preservation. Jesus' kingdom runs on what the Greek New Testament calls *splanchnizomai* — a gut-level, visceral love that cannot look at human suffering and remain unmoved. Where Herod's feast ends with a prophet's head on a platter, Jesus' feast begins with healing and ends with everyone satisfied.

Consider the Kingdom's *presence*. At Herod's feast, the most high God was neither invited nor wanted. But when Jesus fed the five thousand, God Himself sat on the grass with His people — not a distant deity issuing decrees from a throne room, but a King who dwells among those He loves.

Consider the Kingdom's *life*. Herod's feast ended in death. Jesus' feast ended with twelve baskets of bread left over — twelve baskets, one for each tribe of the new covenant people — life, provision, hope overflowing.

This is the beauty of the Kingdom. A kingdom so unlike Herod's, so unlike Rome's, so unlike every earthly structure of power. A kingdom of accessibility, abundance, compassion, presence, and life without end.

The Beauty of the Kingdom's People

But there is still one more layer. What we are seeing in this story is not only the beauty of the King and the beauty of the Kingdom — we are also catching a glimpse of the beauty of the *people* of the Kingdom.

God's purpose has always been to create a kingdom people. In Exodus 19, He tells Israel:

| “*You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*”

The Apostle Peter applies that same language directly to the church:

| “*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession.*” (1 Peter 2:9)

This is who we are — kingdom people, invited not merely to benefit from the King's work but to *participate* in it. And this story shows us exactly what that participation looks like.

First, the Lord gives a command — an impossible command. “*You give them something to eat.*” The disciples know perfectly well it is impossible. The command stands anyway.

Second, they respond exactly as we would: “*We have only five loaves here and two fish.*” Translation: Lord, have You seen the crowd? Have You done the math? This is absurd.

Third, they bring what they have to Jesus and place it in His hands. Jesus does not say, “You're right — terrible idea.” He says, “Bring them here to me.” He takes the five loaves and two fish, looks up to heaven, and pronounces a blessing. And then the miracle happens.

Fourth — and this is the detail that should stop us in our tracks — Jesus does not throw the bread to the crowd Himself. He breaks it, gives it to the disciples, and they distribute it. “*The disciples gave them to the crowds.*” Jesus could have done the whole thing Himself. He chooses not to. He invites them into the miracle. He works through them. And He works through us.

This is the beauty of the people of the Kingdom.

We are part of something larger than ourselves — a kingdom, a nation, a priesthood. We are not isolated individuals trying to make it on our own. We are a people, a family, a body. God does not merely do miracles *for* us; He does miracles *through* us. He invites us into the story. He lets us be part of what He is building in the world.

We get to see impossible things become possible. Five loaves feeding five thousand. Twelve baskets left over. More than enough — always more than enough when Jesus is the one providing.

We do not have to have it all figured out before we obey. We can bring our “only” and watch Him make it enough.

And our weakness does not disqualify us. It is often the very place where His power is made most perfectly visible.

Application: What Is Your “Only”?

So here is my question for you this morning: What is your “only”?

What are you holding back from Jesus because you are convinced it is not enough? What command has He given you that you are staring at with doubt, because you cannot see how it is possible?

Maybe it is a relationship that needs reconciliation, but you only have a small willingness to try. Maybe it is a ministry opportunity, but you only have limited time. Maybe it is a call to generosity, but you only have a modest income. Maybe it is loving someone who is genuinely difficult to love, and you only have a little patience left. Maybe it is sharing your faith, but you only have a simple testimony.

Whatever it is — bring it to Him. Bring what you have right now and place it in His hands. Bring your only to Jesus, ask Him to bless it, and then watch what He does.

Because you are covenant people. You are His kingdom. You are His priesthood. You are His holy nation. And in His hands, your only will always be enough.

Let us pray.