

# HOW MANY LOAVES DO YOU HAVE?

## *Series: "Questions Jesus Asked"*

By Steve Zeisler

There are three stages of growing in maturity in a relationship with Christ that we can discover reading the gospels. The first stage is to be a hearer. There were a great many occasions in Jesus' ministry, in Galilee and Judea, when crowds would gather around to hear what he said. People would know of his miracles. They would be amazed by his insights, his parables, his stories, his commands. But they would gather to hear without a commitment to obey. They were merely observers, merely hearers.

The second stage is to respond to his word, "Follow me." Jesus used that statement a number of times when he called on hearers to become his disciples, to come under his instruction and name him Lord and Master.

The third stage in the process is to become an ambassador, a representative of the Lord in the wider world. That's what we've come to in Mark 6:30-46.

We've been going through the gospel of Mark, stopping at places where Jesus asked a question. Some of the questions have been for hearers; for instance, the question "Who touched me?" (see [Discovery Paper 4573](#)). The woman with a flow of blood who reached out for Jesus was a hearer, a member of the crowd, not one who had decided to follow him. The question "Why are you so afraid?" was asked of followers (see [Discovery Paper 4571](#)). During the storm on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus was asleep in the boat and the disciples were terrified of what would happen to them, Jesus asked them as his followers why their fear should be so great. The question before us now was addressed to ambassadors: "How many loaves do you have? What has God given you that he can put into service to himself?"

We ended up at the end of chapter 5 ([Discovery Paper 4574](#)) in Jairus' house with Jesus' raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Then verses 1-29 of chapter 6 intervene before we get to this story. That intervening section makes reference to growing opposition to Jesus and his message, from his hometown and from Roman rulers. We also hear of how twelve of Jesus' followers were sent out two by two to do mission work in Galilee and the surrounding regions. These twelve had become ambassadors.

The word "apostles" is used in 6:30. This is not a technical term at this point. Eventually the word "apostle" would apply to an office in the church, but here there was no church, no organization, only disciples who were being sent out. The Greek word translated "apostle" means "sent one." "Ambassador" is probably a better translation, just to avoid confusion with the office of apostle to come later on. Jesus sent twelve out at this time (on another occasion he would send seventy others) to preach the gospel, cast out demons, and anoint sufferers for healing. They represented him, calling on others to believe, offering life in his name.

Mark 6:30-46:

**The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."**

**So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 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.

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.

Here are lessons for ambassadors. We can identify two very important ones that I hope to explain. One is the ministry Jesus wants to have to those who have gone out to represent him in the world. It is his ministry of rest and reflection and camaraderie and concern. The other lesson is that there is a need to be more generous than we want to be, to allow God-given interruptions, to offer for the Lord's use what little we have so he can make more of it.

#### FOOD THAT ENDURES TO ETERNAL LIFE

Jesus saw a metaphor in these events. They concern community meals. Notice in verse 31 Jesus recognized that the disciples who had gathered back to him after going out on their missions needed something to eat. In verse 34 we see that the Shepherd knows that sheep who don't have a shepherd require spiritual food, and he begins to teach them. And then of course the main body of the story is about the five loaves and two fish. This small meal becomes such an abundant meal that five thousand are fed and twelve basketfuls are left over.

It's important to see this metaphor, because as we can read in John 6, a day or more later when Jesus was reminding people about what had happened, he said that the meal they had eaten was about something greater, about heavenly food. When we are hungry for something to eat and thirsty for something to drink, when our body calls out for some kind of sustenance, that can remind us that we are hungry for spiritual reality as well. There are needs our soul has for food. We don't have what we need inwardly, and we need God to supply us in the inner person with food and drink, with power, and strength. Recalling this very day when five thousand were fed, John wrote: "Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.'...Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.'" (John 6:26-27, 35.)

The lesson of this meal is about the Bread of Life himself. Every time we go to the faucet for a glass of water or open a cabinet for something to eat, we can remember our greater need for the Bread who has come down from heaven, the One who gives drink that lasts forever. We can let our body teach our soul to draw on the power and the presence and the love of Jesus.

But in addition to metaphorical teaching, the text also tells a story that took place in history. Let's see if we can learn its lessons for ambassadors.

"COME WITH ME TO A QUIET PLACE"

Our family is going to leave this afternoon on a vacation, and naturally we've all been looking forward to that. I was studying this passage last week, and I was struck with new insight about verses 30 and 31 in particular. In verse 30 the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. This is a remarkable experience to have. Such occasions are delightful - life-enhancing, joyful, memorable. These men had served the Lord, gone out in his service, told folks of Christ, reached out their hands to meet others' needs, done the risky and demanding thing that ministry often is, gotten out of their comfort zone, and gone where the Lord sent them. Then they returned and got together, sitting around a campfire at night, perhaps, with Jesus at the center of the gathering. They reported to him all that had happened and heard the reports of the others. One would speak of what happened in the towns where they went, and the others would rejoice in what God had done in that brother's experience. Then another would speak, until finally all had had a turn to say what God had done through them.

It is as heavenly an experience as you can have to know that there are other folks who love the Lord you love, who are laying their life on the line in his service, and to be able to gather together with them and hear the stories and know Jesus is there in your midst, that he has called you together. It's not always around a campfire. Sometimes it's in an airport lounge, in a retreat center, in a staff meeting, in a van driving back from ministering somewhere. Wherever the reporting happens, those people are bonded together. There's a camaraderie, an intimacy, a love for one another that is unique. The best friends I have in the world are those with whom I've had this kind of experience. Some people I know who fell in love with each other for the right reasons did so in settings like this. They weren't looking for someone to marry but for a way to serve the Lord, and they realized that the person sitting nearby had the same passion for Christ that they did. That's a great basis on which to build a friendship or a relationship that leads to marriage.

Then verse 31 is, if anything, even better. So many people were coming and going, they didn't have a chance to eat. The crowds gathered wherever they went. So Jesus said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." That's one of the most tender statements that Jesus made. "I want to be with you. Come with me to a place that I will choose for you, a place of quiet, rest, refreshment." This is our family vacation verse for the summer. But of course what Jesus was referring to was more than just ordinary getting away. The invitation was to be with him, and to receive the kind of rest that only he could give. We're learning an important lesson here: Those who are willing to go where the Lord calls them to go, use the gifts he's given them, and take on enemies and difficulties, need what he supplies for them here as well. They need time for rest, to be refreshed, to receive his approval in a quiet place.

Last week more than 150 of us went camping together at Lake Siskiyou, near Mount Shasta in northern California, for our annual church family camp. It was a wonderful time. It was hot and dusty, but it was fun to be making new friends amidst both planned and spontaneous activities. The person who was at the center of everything was Carol Lind. Carol has led these family camps for seven years. Her campsite was in the middle of all activity. She had to answer the questions. She was the one who kept the message board and made decisions about what events would happen when. But I realized that in the midst of it all, Carol was relaxed and enjoying herself. She had as much fun as anyone, and she wasn't particularly stressed by the demands of planning for so many people.

Toward evening one day she said, "I want to suggest something for you to do later tonight. When it's dark and it gets quiet, walk away from the campsites and lanterns. Find a place where you can see God's handiwork - look at Mount Shasta and the moonlight on the snow." Carol had taken time, in the midst of everything else involved with being a good pastor to this flock, to get some time alone with the Lord, to "come with me by yourself to a quiet place and get some rest." To be engaged as an ambassador doesn't mean that we are always on duty, everlastingly responsive to every concern of every person. It means that we also receive the gift of rest that Jesus gives us.

## COMPASSION FOR THE SEEKING CROWDS

We can't demand such experiences, however. They are the Lord's to initiate for us. In this case, although Jesus invited the twelve to come away to a quiet place for rest, the rest wasn't allowed. His heavenly Father had something else in mind, and a crowd of people rushed around the lake to the place where he and the disciples were going for their retreat. Thousands of them eventually showed up, and Jesus, not under

compulsion, with other people dictating his schedule-Jesus never lived that way-but because of compassion, seeing that these were sheep without a shepherd, needy people, lonely, uncertain, foolish, and lost, he began ministering to them, rather than pushing them away so that the retreat could go on uninterrupted. This was an important lesson for the disciples, too. He invited them to rest; he also indicated that God sometimes interrupts the plan. And he most often interrupts it for compassion's sake.

What are sheep without a shepherd like? Perhaps you have friends who drift through life for reasons they don't understand, pushed back and forth by each "latest thing," who are forever looking for answers without being able to find them. We don't have to look very far to see people like that. This world is filled with them. They go from one seminar to another, one guru to another, one fad to another. Sheep without a shepherd are difficult people. They show up when we don't expect them. They bleat and complain and demand. It's easier to avoid them. But Jesus' compassion wouldn't let him avoid them, and he won't let us let us avoid them either, if we're his ambassadors.

I got caught in a traffic jam the other day at the Shoreline Amphitheater, among a group of people trying to get in for a concert. I felt like I had been transported back in time. There were lines of folks with tie-dyed shirts and headbands and old Volkswagen buses painted odd colors. It was a concert reprising the music of the Grateful Dead. All these people were standing in the hot sun trying to get in to hear music of a band that doesn't exist anymore and remembering times that may not deserve to be remembered. If ever there were sheep without a shepherd, it was the people in this line.

I also read recently that major-league baseball teams are setting attendance records when they have Beanie Baby night. That kind of fad response, going where you're told to go by whatever media manipulation is taking place at the moment, reveals people who are sheep without a shepherd, without direction.

Jesus had compassion on such people. He directed his ambassadors, his representatives, to have compassion as well. He made a place for the seeking crowds. They were invited. Where he was, they belonged.

But what Jesus didn't do was encourage them to spend the time articulating their longings. He didn't focus on the fact of their search. He didn't speak to them of their felt needs. He didn't encourage them to know better how desperate and unsure and sheeplike and lost they were. What he did was teach them. The sheep without a shepherd were welcome, but he was going to tell them the great themes of the gospel. He was going to teach them how to have security of heart and purpose. He was going to offer them truth in place of the endless insecurities they came with. It says that he taught them "many things." He gave them truth that began with him and made sense of everything else in life. And he expected his ambassadors to learn from him, to have compassion and to offer truth in the place of lostness.

## THE MIRACLES GOD WANTS TO DO THROUGH US

But the disciples interrupted the Lord, as they often did. It's always a bad idea to speak to Jesus with the assumption that he doesn't know what's going on. I think many of us pray with a similar outlook. They came to him to inform him (verse 35) of realities that he had obviously failed to take into account. "It's growing late. Look at how many people there are here. There's no food. We need to send them off to the villages to buy food. If we don't send them quickly, it will be too dark. In your wonderful teaching way, you're obviously not paying attention to what's going on."

To their surprise, Jesus turned the discussion back to them. Verse 37: "But he answered, 'You give them something to eat.'" And this is another lesson for ambassadors: They had an opportunity to serve the Lord in meeting the needs of sheep without a shepherd.

The disciples-become-ambassadors probably had mixed motives in bringing this problem to his attention. On the one hand, they were concerned for the people. The people were hungry. It was late in the day. That was a genuine problem. But I think they were motivated as well by the desire to get the retreat back on course. "We've spent a day being compassionate to these people. Let's be done with them and go back to this time of camaraderie and being gathered together and intimacy with you, Lord. Let's get back what you promised us at the beginning."

Jesus taught these men two lessons by calling on them to feed the people. Jesus says, "You feed them," to

people like us as well. Our tendency is to look at what is humanly possible: the money, the conditions, whether we have the right computers and the right building, whether we're set up for this, whether we can make it happen, and so on-and we conclude that it's impossible. We don't have what it takes. The human players in this drama can't do what God says they should do.

The tendency, further, is to leave people to their own devices. They had been listening to teaching, but now they needed to go solve their own problems. They were going to get hungry and they needed to go do something about it. There was nothing miraculous or heavenly about the thinking of these ambassadors. That is probably why Jesus had the crowd broken up into circles of fifty and one hundred, just to make the point that five thousand people, when looked at only as a whole, is overwhelming to consider; but if it's a hundred groups of fifty, you can begin caring for them. Jesus was trying to help the disciples not to reflexively be overwhelmed by the huge difficulty. "Evangelize all the world" sounds impossible. But instead of seeing that as the assignment, we can see "Share Christ with the folks in front of you" as an assignment that is possible. It's still risky and difficult. It still requires the power of God. But it's not impossible.

The second lesson here is that Jesus didn't do the miracle without their cooperation. He could have. Previously, he had done miracles without assistance. He had cast out demons, healed the sick, given a lame man the strength to walk, brought back a little child from the dead. But now he was training those who would serve him, and he called on them to offer what they had. And what little they had became that which he used to bless the crowd, and by extension, as we learn from him, to bless the world.

How many loaves do you have? What do you have to offer? What house do you live in? What bank account do you own? What place do you work? What friendship network do you have? What has God given you that he can expand in his service, that he could turn around and use, through you, to bless and challenge and change and give life where there is no life? When we become his representatives in the world, he intends to use us just as we are. There's no difficulty in qualifying for this responsibility. You don't need a degree. You don't need the approval of your organization. You don't need a title. To become an ambassador is to become willing to offer him what you have for him to use to change the world.

Let me review just briefly to conclude. "Come away with me to a quiet place to rest" is not something to be taken lightly. The joy of serving the Lord with other people, the joy of taking risks in the name of the gospel of Christ, to go to challenging places, and then to return again and be strengthened by the stories of his use of other people, to sit around the campfire with Jesus in the midst, for him to offer us all the life that comes in such a circle, to be invited to rest with him at the heart of our experience, are very powerful gifts that he still intends to give those who serve him. But the other lesson here is that he will take us out of comfort zones, take the little we have and make more of it, find a way to use us to offer blessing that people need.

There is joy in Christian service. Becoming an ambassador is the most marvelous thing in the world. Our God has, in a peculiar way, limited himself to using people like us. We are the body of Christ, God's incarnation, now. He needs our willingness to offer the loaves we have. He needs us to take up the gifts that we've been given, to walk through the open door set before us, to buy up the opportunities we have. The cause of Christ needs our contribution.

But even more, we need what we receive by acting in faith. We were made to serve. It's what God intended for us, and resistance to the opportunities depletes us. We're not what we were made for if we don't learn the lessons that Jesus was teaching these folks.

So I urge ambassadorship on you. There's nothing you'll enjoy more in life. There is no greater way to live.

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Seventh Message

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