

July 13, 2025

OUR GOOD SHEPHERD AND HIS GRACIOUS PROVISION

Mark 6:31-44

(13 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

Earlier this summer, as we were visiting Chris and Sarah Ortiz in New York, Sarah informed us that she had free tickets for us to the Met. Now, for those of you who received as poor of an education as I did, the Met is short for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. So, our family boarded the subway and took off to look at an art museum. And it was enjoyable. I would walk from room to room, critiquing the work of people much more talented than me, when finally I entered a room of paintings that was captivating.

Now, at first, I wasn't really captivated. You see, the way the rooms are laid out is that one wall may have a few paintings by the same artist. And that was the case in this room. As I looked at the far wall, there were about four paintings of pretty ordinary scenes. It was a lady reading a book or a couple of children walking along the shore or the like. And, again, the paintings were nice but not that captivating. But then as I walked closer to them, I found myself overwhelmed at how impressive these paintings were.

The reason why I was so overwhelmed is because there was much more to these paintings than I realized. They were actually composed of hundreds and thousands of little globs of paint. When you looked close, you could see a little drop of paint that—even in that little drop—contained a variety of greens, blues, and browns. But when you stepped back, all of those little drops came together to make a picture that was beautiful. From a distance, what just seemed like a picture not unlike all the others, with a couple of children walking on the shore, turned into one of the most impressive things I've ever seen. And it made me so grateful that I hadn't just remained at a distance and walked through that room into the next, giving only a cursory glance at those paintings. I'm so thankful that I stopped, drew in close, and looked at the details that formed a much more overwhelmingly impressive painting than I'd realized was there.

Well, this morning, I want us to do the same thing as we look together at Mark 6:31-44. Like that painting I saw in the Met, you could easily rush past the story in this text and miss how overwhelmingly impressive and revealing it is. Mark 6:31-44 is Mark's record of Jesus feeding the 5,000. It's a story that we're all familiar with. We've probably heard countless Sunday school lessons and sermons on this miracle that Jesus performed. And one reason for that is that though the gospel writers chose to include different elements of Jesus' ministry in their writing, all four of them included this story. Therefore, we've heard it, we're familiar with it, and we're perhaps tempted to rush past it, doing the equivalent of only appreciating that painting from a distance and walking away.

But this morning I want us to allow ourselves to pause before this story, draw in close to pay attention to the details, and consider what Mark wanted us to see as he recorded this story for his readers—including us. Specifically, I want us to recognize what this story teaches us about

who Jesus is, what he demands of us, and what our response should be. Let's begin then with recognizing what this story tells us about who Jesus is. And if we pay attention to the details, one thing we should see that Mark is telling us is that Jesus is the good shepherd.

Jesus is the good shepherd

Let me walk through the details and show you how I think Mark is showing this to us. The story begins with the twelve coming back to Jesus after he'd sent them on that journey where they were given authority to cast out demons, heal diseases, and to trust the Lord's provision as they had limited supplies. Now, they've come back and given the report to Jesus of all that they'd done and taught. And Jesus' response to them is, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while" (v. 31). The reason Jesus is inviting them to rest is because so many people are coming to them, that they hadn't even had the leisure to stop and eat. And so Jesus is looking out for them in their busyness, calling them to come and rest.

Now, that's actually the first hint we have that Jesus is showing himself as the good shepherd. After all, the first thing that Psalm 23 mentions after declaring, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" is that he "makes me lie down." Then, later in the psalm, we're told the good shepherd "restores my soul" (Ps 23:3). In other words, the shepherd leads the sheep to a place of rest of restoration. And here Jesus is doing the same for the twelve.

However, we quickly find out that this plan of relaxation isn't quite going to work. The reason why is because though Jesus and the disciples get into a boat to sail away to a desolate place, the crowds recognize where they're going and run ahead of them and meet them there so that when Jesus and the disciples come ashore, they'll be greeted by masses of people. However, it's at this moment that we see the second hint that Jesus is our good shepherd.

As Jesus comes to the shore with his disciples, only to see that they're not going to be left alone to rest but instead overwhelmed by the crowds, you might think that Jesus would rebuke the crowds, tell them to leave them alone for a bit, or express some kind of righteous frustration at them. But he doesn't. Instead, Mark tells us, "When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things" (v. 34). Jesus sees them as sheep without a shepherd, and so he steps in to shepherd and care for these crowds. Again, clearly he's the good shepherd. And yet there's more.

As Jesus is teaching this crowd who'd joined him and the disciples in this desolate place, another issue arises. As it's growing late, the disciples see that there's a problem developing. These people are no doubt getting hungry, it's getting late, and they're in a desolate place. In other words, there's no market right there at the site. These people are going to have to go on a journey just to get food at the surrounding villages, and they're probably about to want to eat any moment. And so they note the issue and suggest a solution to Jesus, saying, "This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and but themselves something to eat" (vv. 35-36).

Now, Jesus' answer to this is odd. He tells the disciples, "You give them something to eat" (v. 37). The reason that's odd is because Jesus is suggesting a seemingly impossible task. It's like your toddler walking up to you and asking you to get him something off the top of the fridge, and you answering, "You get it." Well, obviously, he'll tell you, "I can't." And the disciples make the same point here. They ask Jesus, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?" (v. 37).

Now, the craziness of their question could be lost on us if we fail to realize that one denarii was considered an average day's wage. And we know from the last sentence that there were 5,000 men present (v. 44) and from other gospel writers that this number didn't include women and children (see, e.g., Matt 14:21). And, so, it might be 15,000 plus people there. Therefore, the disciples have estimated that even if they were able to go get food and transport it back to the people, it would require two-thirds of a person's annual salary. This would be the modern-day equivalent of saying, "Shall we go buy tens of thousands of dollars' worth of groceries to feed the crowd?" I think we get the point of the disciples' question. It wasn't a sincere one but one asked to point out the ridiculous nature of Jesus' command for the disciples to feed the people.

But Jesus was about to do something miraculous. He first asks the disciples how many loaves of bread they have, and they inform him that they have five loaves and two fish. And then Jesus turns to the crowd, telling them to sit down in groups of fifties and hundreds. But it's not just that Jesus tells them to sit down. Notice the detail Mark gives us in verse 39, "Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups *on the green grass*." I think that's to remind us of Psalm 23:2, which says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures."

And then, Jesus takes loaves and fish, blesses them, breaks them, and gives them to the disciples to give to the people. And not only were there enough so that the people all ate and "were satisfied" (a reminder of the psalmist declaring, "I shall not want" (Ps 23:1)), but each of the twelve took up a basketful so that there were twelve baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish as leftovers. Jesus has provided for these sheep without a shepherd, preparing a table before them (Ps 23:5) right there in the wilderness so that they may be satisfied, rest, and be restored.

In other words, it's not just that Jesus has performed a miracle, yet again, he's shown us who he is. He reveals himself to be a good shepherd to these shepherdless sheep, showing his compassion toward them as he provides rest, restoration, food, and satisfaction. Jesus is the good shepherd of Psalm 23.

Now, for us, let this be a gracious reminder of who our Lord is. He knows our weakness. He is able to sympathize and show compassion. He is gentle and lowly in heart. He delights in caring for us, restoring us in our exhaustion, and showing his compassion toward us. And this fits what we know of our God. Remember when Moses asked the Lord to show him his glory, and the Lord passed by Moses declaring who he is? Listen to the first characteristics God reveals to Moses about who he is. He says, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod 34:6-7). Now, yes, he goes on to reveal his holiness and justice, declaring that he will punish sins. But look at what he leads with. I mean, you might imagine the God who created all and rules over all beginning with his majestic and awesome might. But instead he speaks of his mercy, grace, slowness to anger, abounding love and faithfulness, and willingness to forgive our sins. That’s what Jesus is reflecting here. He is the good shepherd toward us—his sheep. And we need to make a habit of sitting before him, reading his Word, and enjoying his presence in prayer until we find ourselves moved by his gracious nature and steadfast love. After all, the greatest command we have is to love him, and we love him only as we recognize that he has first loved us. He is the good shepherd who some chapters later will lay down his life for his sheep. But I want to see another note from this story about what Jesus demands of us, namely, that, as our good shepherd, our Lord will command us to do what we can only do by his provision.

As our good shepherd, our Lord will command us to do what we can only do by his provision

Perhaps you can see where I’m drawing this from the text. When the disciples point out the need for the people to eat, Jesus’ first response is to say to them, “You give them something to eat” (v. 37). Now, why? After all, Jesus knows that’s an impossible task for them.

Well, we’re helped from the gospel of John here where he adds the note that Jesus challenges and questions the disciples about feeding the crowd here in order to “test” them, “for he himself knew what he would do” (John 6:6). In other words, Jesus commands his disciples to do the impossible because they should have recognized that the one commanding them was capable of doing in and through them what they found impossible. After all, consider all that Jesus has done prior to this and that they’d just returned from a journey where they’d taken limited supplies, and not only were they provided for but they’d healed and cast out demons by the power and authority of Jesus. You’d think they could have answered Jesus, “Just tell us what you want us to do,” with full trust that Jesus would somehow come through again. I mean, they did end up doing this impossible thing, after all. They fed the 5,000 as Jesus miraculously supplied enough bread and dried fish to do so. Jesus had commanded them to do what could only be done by his provision.

But is it really fair to say that our Lord will command *us* to do what we can only do by his provision simply because we see him doing so in this story? I mean, couldn’t this be a one-off? Sure, it could be. But a brief survey of Scripture will reveal that it isn’t. First, consider all the times that the Lord commanded the Israelites in battle. Gideon was charged to overcome thousands with only 300 men or Joshua to conquer the walled city of Jericho, for example. In each case, the Lord provided miraculously. And those are just some samples among many instances. We could add Moses command to go bring the Israelites out of Egypt and more. Consider, as we get to the New Testament, the Lord’s command to the apostle Paul as he tells him that he was sending him to the Gentiles “to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18), something clearly only possible through his provision. And, of course, he sends us into the world as sheep in the midst

of wolves to make disciples of all the nations, something only possible through the gifts and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. But I want us to consider how faithfully the Lord calls us to tasks and require his provision and then provides everything need to carry them out, just as he does with the disciples here. Isn't this picture of the disciples distributing enough food to feed thousands a picture of the Christian life in general?

The Lord really pressed this on me earlier this year. Around February I was sitting out on my back porch reading the Scripture one morning, and specifically I was reading Numbers 13-14. You probably know the scene. The Israelites have been told to enter the promised land, so they send twelve to spy out the land. And upon their return, they report that it's impossible. There's no way they can take the land. Those in the land make them look like grasshoppers.

I read this thinking, "C'mon, Israelites, after all the Lord has done? It's not about your ability but about God's power." Well, then I finished my reading and began to pray, and as I prayed, I felt burdened to ask the Lord how much he might want us to give this year in offering. We'd already set an amount, but I felt the Lord might want to push us even more, and so I asked him if there was an amount that he wanted us to give.

I mean, immediately after praying that, a number popped into my head, and I said, out loud, "That's impossible." I'm not exaggerating. That was my out loud response—just after reading Numbers 13-14. Of course, I immediately thought of faithless Israel, was convicted, but proceeded to explain to the Lord why this would be impossible. For one, there's no way in my mind I could give that amount and pay my bills. And then, we had additional needs on the horizon. Our third was about to start college. Our vehicle had been acting up. And on and on. But all I could think about was that I didn't want to be like the Israelites, so I went in and asked Lili to start praying about it. After all, I may well be missing the Lord altogether.

Well, after praying and discussing, Lili also concluded that this is exactly what the Lord was leading us to do. He was asking us to give what we simply couldn't give apart from his provision. I remember meditating on 2 Corinthians 9:10 in which Paul had written to the Corinthians, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness." And I couldn't get away from thinking that if the Lord was leading us to sow (i.e. give) then he'd supply and multiply seed (i.e. money) for sowing.

And, brothers and sisters, I wish I had time to give you all the details in how he's done this. It's almost embarrassing how gracious the Lord has been with us. Scholarships and vouchers we never anticipated came through. We needed to get a few MRIs, and though my insurance company never pays anything, they'll usually negotiate with the medical services people to drive those prices down as much as twenty-seven to thirty cents. And now, we were seeing discounts of eighty percent. Long story short, despite my heart being too much like the faithless Israelites in Numbers 13-14, the Lord has provided in amazing ways, providing and multiplying seed for sowing.

But I don't think this is out of the ordinary. I think that's a summary of Christian living. The Lord commands us to do what can only be done by his power and provision, and so all obedience is an act of faith that should result in praise and thanksgiving to God.

Now, I'll add one more note about this. That 2 Corinthians 9:10 text I've meditated on this year says not only that he'll supply and multiply your seed for sowing but also that he'll "increase the harvest of your righteousness." That is, he'll bless you with eternal reward. Do you see how almost incomprehensibly gracious that is of God? I mean, imagine if Jesus pulled the disciples over after the feeding of the 5,000 and said, "That was great, guys. I'm going to bless you because of your obedience. I mean, you fed thousands." They'd rightly respond, "Well, Jesus, I really feel like you did the heavy lifting on this one." I mean, Jesus supplied and multiplied enough bread and fish to feed the thousands and have leftovers. All the disciples did was give what Jesus had first given to them. But how different is that from what Paul writes to the Philippians when he tells them to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13)?

Again, let's recognize that this is how we're to live as believers. We walk by obedient faith. What does any of us give that we haven't first been given by him? Even now, if my preaching is helpful, it is because the Spirit is supplying everything needed. And yet the Lord graciously blesses our obedience. He gets the glory, rightly so, and yet he blesses us for our obedience.

And so that's leads us to this application. Our task as believers is to trust the Lord, obey him, and enjoy the blessings of obedience.

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What a story this must have been for the disciples. I imagine at times in their lives they gathered with other believers who said, "Tell me what it was like when you started distributing that bread and dried fish to the thousands that day" and told the amazing story.

You and I should have the same kinds of stories—stories of God's faithfulness, love, goodness, and provision. Maybe even now he's burdening you to walk a road that feels impossible. Trust him. What is impossible for our Lord?

Crazy enough, I preached this story twenty-five years ago when I started pastoring here and dared to say, "What if the Lord would allow us to distribute church planters and pastors all over the globe?" Oh, how gracious he has been as he allows us to give what he has first given to us. So let's keep trusting, obeying, and enjoying the blessings of obeying him. Amen.