

## **Mission Impossible**

### **Matt 14:13-36**

Creekside Community Church, San Leandro, California

Greg V. Arthur, October 8, 2017

**Matt 14:15-17** - <sup>15</sup> When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." <sup>16</sup> But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup> And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

### **Misunderestimated**

Good morning Creekside, I'm Greg Arthur, one of the pastors here. As you may know, we have been going through the Gospel of Matthew in a sermon series entitled, "The Return of the King." Last week, we spoke about bias, how personal and cultural biases in our thinking can cloud our minds, and keep us from truly seeing Christ. Today, I'd like to follow-up with expectations, how wrong expectations about Christ and His will can cloud our hearts, and keep us from truly seeking Christ.

So, regarding expectations. Have you ever heard the word underestimated? It's a word like jackalope, or spork, or sharknado. These aren't real words in the dictionary, but rather two ideas mashed together into one word. There are so many great ones – mansplaining, chillax, bromance. But I think as mashed together words go, underestimated is a particular beauty, made famous when out of thin air, President George W. Bush, on election night, said as only he could, "They underestimated me." Misunderstood and underestimated mashed into one word. Misunderestimated. I single out this word, because it mansplains something true about Jesus, that He was misunderstood and underestimated. And it explains how we in the same way often miss the mark when we consider Jesus, for like the leaders of His day, we can underestimate Him as a little-k king, or like the multitudes of His day, we can see Him as a capital-K King, but misunderstand His will, what He intends to do as King. Now it is fundamentally important for us to see Christ rightly, to rightly estimate Him as the King, and to rightly understand His will, ... in particular so that we might have right expectations of how to live in reality, now in this day and age, now that His Kingdom is at hand.

***Why are right expectations so important?*** Is it not true that expectations largely determine our heart? Wrong expectations, which because they are wrong go unmet, result in a disappointed heart. Right expectations, are met and so lead to at least the peace of mind that comes from living in reality, if not out-and-out joy. And wrong expectations about the central fact of reality, Christ and His Kingdom, or about His will, or about how life will be like in this day and age, ... wrong expectations will ultimately lead us in some way to a disappointment in God Himself, and a weakened faith in Christ, lessened joy in us, and perhaps even a hard, angry heart that no longer seeks after Him. How sad it is when we are disappointed in the One who truly loves us, who died on a cross to save us from our sins.

For example, regarding right and wrong expectations: As you graduate with a degree in the glorious field of, let's say, ... sewage engineering, someone says to you, "you're so money, you're the six-million-dollar man." And then the greatest sewage job is offered to you, and when you say, "yes, that's what I've always wanted to do," they say, "great we'll pay you \$24,000." And you say, because you are so money, "a week?" And they say, "um, a year." By the way, that was my starting salary out of college. But because you think you're so money, although hired into the most glorious of jobs, you start work bitterly disappointed with your meager pay. And why? Wrong 'six-million-dollar-man' expectations. Or, as you graduate, someone says, "you're not so money; you must earn every cent by working hard and doing well." And the same \$24,000 per year job comes along, and you say through tears of joy, "O thank you, thank you, thank you." Why? Right expectations. It is very important in life to have our hearts firmly set in reality by having right expectations.

Today, I hope to show from the scriptures, one certain crucial right expectation to have about the Christian life, now that the reality of the Kingdom of God is hand, and it is this:

- Christ will call us to do the impossible, and then do it for us.
- Or perhaps to say it another way: God will give us more than we can handle so that "*God may be glorified in the Son,*"<sup>1</sup> and we will "*rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead,*"<sup>2</sup> as it says in the scriptures.
- Or to say it as the gospel song sung today said it, "When the storms of life are raging, and their fury falls on me ... I say to my soul, 'don't worry, The Lord will make a way somehow.'"<sup>3</sup>
- Or to say it in a prayer that I have pleaded to my Lord and Savior many times: "O Lord, You have told me to do this impossible thing; I want to but I can't, I don't know how, I don't have the power, I can't change my heart; so Lord, help me, You are going to have to do it for me, My Lord."
- Or as it is said in the scriptures, "*For when I am weak, then I am strong.*"<sup>4</sup>

Getting this expectation right, that Christ will call us to do the impossible, so that "*God may be glorified in the Son*" and we "*rely not on ourselves but on God who raises from the dead,*" ... it is so crucial that all four gospels include an account of one event when this fact of life was made evident --- and that is the miracle of feeding the 5,000.

This is a very familiar Bible story to many of us. That it's told four times amplifies that there is truth in this story God wants us to know. My goal today is that anytime, whenever anyone of us, find ourselves lacking and overwhelmed in life, when the future seems hard, and the road ahead long, when defeat feels like it's coming, and the mission impossible, when you are saying with me, "O Lord, I can't do this, You are going to have to do it for me, my King

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:13-14

<sup>2</sup> 2Cor 1:9

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Dorsey / arr. Edwin Hawkins and the Angels of Mercy, 'Leap of Faith' sound tract, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> 2Cor 12:10

and my God,” ... my goal today is we will remember how Christ called the disciples to feed the 5,000, and then did it for them. And it is my hope we will forever associate Christ feeding the 5,000 with how He will do the impossible for us, of how He will make a way, of how in all things He will be glorified, and especially of the fact that being over our heads is the normal Christian life, *for when I am weak then I am strong*. It is my hope that this story will be at the top of our minds when we face the impossible. I’ve entitled this talk “Mission Impossible.”

## **Christ Alone Sets Right Expectations**

***How do we come to have right expectations in life?*** Who can tell us what to expect? Who has the authority and understanding to say in the past, what we know today, about what will be in the future? And who can do that not only for us now, but for our great-grandparents before us and our great-grandchildren after us. Only God. So, this is how we come to have right expectations in life, by intently listening to what God has said in His Word and believing Him. In fact, I would go a step further and say by also ceasing to intently listen to what anyone else says, and so cease believing them. It is as Paul wrote in the scriptures, “*I have decided to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified.*”<sup>5</sup> He admits only one salient fact about reality as the one absolute truth to live by, and that is Christ (which means King) and Him crucified (which means He’s the Savior). In other words, all right expectations come from one absolute truth which is this: Jesus is Savior King.

For weeks now, we have been intently looking at the Gospel of Matthew, now about half way through. Picking up where we left off, the passage about feeding the 5,000 begins like this:

**Matt 14:13** – <sup>13</sup> When Jesus heard it, He departed from there by boat to a deserted place by Himself. But when the multitudes heard it, they followed Him on foot from the cities.

When Jesus heard what? Well, from the passage right before, it’s when Jesus heard that Herod, the governor, beheaded John the Baptist because of oaths Herod made at a party.<sup>6</sup> Matthew preceded that account with a series of parables where Christ taught the disciples that until He comes again, His Kingdom will exist alongside the evil kingdom of this fallen world.<sup>7</sup> ***What will our Christian life be like in this age?*** There won’t be fire and fury, Christ conquering nations and installing His Kingdom by force. Rather, His Kingdom will come without fanfare and under the radar, like a tiny mustard seed, one person at a time rescued into His Kingdom by faith in Him, emancipated, liberated, made righteous, made new, born again, never to die, one at a time. And it will spread, like yeast in dough, as His gospel is shared, from person to person, house to house, family to family. In other words, Jesus sets the right expectation for the disciples and for us, that we will be in the world but not of this evil fallen world. We’ll be like wheat growing alongside weeds in a field until the last day.

And right on cue, as if events in the fallen world say to Jesus, “yes that’s right,” an evil weed rears up and Herod, for the most pointless of unjust reasons, has John the Baptist beheaded.

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<sup>5</sup> 1Cor 2:2

<sup>6</sup> Matt 14:1-12

<sup>7</sup> Matt 13:1-52

And so, the passage says, Jesus withdraws by boat to a deserted place. Now I don't think he withdrew because Herod is a threat. Rather, it seems He left to give the disciples a rest from the frenzy surrounding Him, to get away from the limelight, (that's what's implied in Mark 6).<sup>8</sup> And there, Jesus will prepare them to be wheat among the weeds in the fallen world.

But there is catch. When the multitudes heard of John the Baptist's execution, they left their towns on foot seeking Jesus. The passage doesn't say why this execution causes them to go but we can hear the desperation in it. Perhaps it was the last straw for desperate people. They were oppressed by the Romans, controlled by the religious leaders, despised by the Pharisees, and exploited by landowners. They were sick and afflicted, blind, deaf, leprous. They were heavily taxed, by the Romans, on toll roads, and in multiple temple tithes, even though most were servants or sharecroppers whose labor scarcely benefited them but made others wealthy.<sup>9</sup> Few were as well off as the fishermen of Galilee. Most really had nothing and no one. Only the Romans and their army of gladiators. Only Pilate and his public crucifixions. Only Jewish leaders and their drunken parties. Only Herod and his beheadings. The multitudes hunger for relief, long for release, hope for a better day, and so when Herod executes John the Baptist, they take all their desperation and gather up the kids and flock to Jesus with nothing but the clothes on their back.

### **Expect Christ To Call Us to Do the Impossible**

And the passage then says Christ is moved with compassion for the desperate masses.

**Matt 14:14-21** – <sup>14</sup> And when Jesus went out He saw a great multitude; and He was moved with compassion for them, and healed their sick. <sup>15</sup> When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." <sup>16</sup> But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup> And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish." <sup>18</sup> He said, "Bring them here to Me." <sup>19</sup> Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes. <sup>20</sup> So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained. <sup>21</sup> Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

He was moved with compassion and healed the sick. Another account says He taught them throughout the day as well.<sup>10</sup> And when it became late, he was unwilling to send off these desperate people to go find food for themselves, so He feeds them, miraculously out of thin air. There is something moving about the way this story is remembered. Matthew, an eyewitness to it says to us, "*So they all ate and were filled ... Now those who had eaten were five thousand men, besides women and children.*" You can hear in his words how he was

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 6:31

<sup>9</sup> Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, entry on Economics; Joel B. Green, Intervarsity Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 6:34, Luke 9:11

moved by the mercy Christ had for so many. It's like hearing someone remember how their grandfather was a firefighter who once got everyone safely out of a burning house. "Now everyone got out alive, the men, the women, and the children." *"Now those who had eaten were about five thousand men, besides women and children."*

If you were already convinced He is the King of heaven and earth, you would be stunned not just by His power, but by the tenderness Christ has for the desperate, how He regards women and children, the aged and the weak, the sick and the troubled, the helpless and the hopeless, how He cares for the small troubles of the day. He is no ordinary king invested in his rule, but He is a Savior King whose heart breaks for the plight of people in this evil fallen world.

And the way Christ goes about feeding them is dignifying to them. He doesn't have them line up like in a school cafeteria, waiting to walk by for food slopped on a tray. Instead He gives it to the disciples who serve the multitudes where they are sitting on the grass, like a restaurant with waiters, or like royalty on the palace lawn with servants. This also would stand out, the dignity with which this King treats the lowly. It would make a deep lasting impression how every time He heals someone or teaches someone or restores someone He does so with the touch of dignity. Like the time Christ raised the synagogue ruler, Jairus's, dead daughter back to life. The passage says that He, *"took her by the hand and called, saying, 'Little girl, arise,'"* like she was court royalty, and He was her suitor and not her King.<sup>11</sup> You would be awestruck, maybe even humbled and speechless, by the dignity with which this King of kings treats even the most insignificant person.

Perhaps you are one of the desperate. Perhaps today, you're desperate for God to fix trouble in your life. And He may. Or He may, as He often seems to do, go with us through the trouble. But we can know that in every encounter with Christ, He will have compassion for our plight, and tender mercy toward us, and dignify us with His grace. What could possibly be more healing than having the King of kings come be with us in our troubles. So, if you are one of the desperate today, leave yourself and seek after Him, in prayer and with His people. As it says in the scriptures, *"draw near to Him, and He will draw near to you."*<sup>12</sup>

Now, this miracle of feeding the 5,000 is like the other miracles accomplished by Christ. He was moved with compassion to do what only God can do -- raise the dead, restore sight to the blind, or cleanse someone of leprosy. However, this miracle of feeding the 5,000 has one curious difference. Christ commands the disciples to do it first.

**Matt 14:15-17** – <sup>15</sup> When it was evening, His disciples came to Him, saying, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." <sup>16</sup> But Jesus said to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." <sup>17</sup> And they said to Him, "We have here only five loaves and two fish."

You give them something to eat! Jesus commands them to do something impossible, to feed a crowd of around 15,000, the capacity of Oracle arena. One of the other accounts said they

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 8:54

<sup>12</sup> James 4:8

thought it would cost at least 200 days wages,<sup>13</sup> -- which in today's economy would be thirty to forty thousand dollars, or a buck and a half to two for every person there. And they have exactly five small loaves of bread and two fish. One of the other accounts says it wasn't even theirs but belonged to a boy.<sup>14</sup> So they really had exactly nothing. Now, if they had nothing, just why would Jesus command them to do what they could not do? Why would He give them an impossible mission? That's the question I'd like to focus on for the remainder of the time. Why would He require them to do the impossible? ***Would Christ also require us to do the impossible?***

The disciples rightly say to Jesus that they can't do what He's commanding them to do. They rightly conclude that they don't have any way to come up with that much food. In fact, what little they do come up with belongs to someone else. Jesus then has them bring the bread and fish to Him, and before them in the presence of every person there, He blesses and breaks the bread and gives it to the disciples to give to the people. Just how five loaves become tens of thousands is a question that is not even asked. It is an impossibility. The moment itself of bringing forth something from nothing is not described and I think cannot be described. Even with thousands looking on, no one would see how the loaves appeared.

Matthew testifies that they saw Christ look up to heaven, and that He blessed and broke the five loaves. But the moment of creating bread out of thin air, like the Creation itself from the void, is God's purview alone and is hidden. Creation coming into being can't be witnessed or described. Only who it was who created can be witnessed. Only the results of creation can be described, which in this passage is done in the most matter of fact way -- *So they all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments that remained.* But the miracle itself can't even be imagined. The best Hollywood can do with all the power of CGI in all the Jesus films is to depict a bottomless barrel of bread. What Christ commanded the disciples to do was something only God can even think up, and thus impossible, for them.

So, why would He command them to do the impossible, only to then do it for them? Why not just say what He is going to do before accomplishing this miracle? Well, what if He is teaching them? What if He is preparing them for the future when He sends them out into the fallen world? What if He is setting their expectations and ours, that the normal Christian life after He ascends into heaven until the day He comes back will involve impossible missions that He then will do for us. And what did the disciples actually do in the end? They brought the boy's bread and fish to Him, and they passed out the bounty that Jesus created out of thin air. They participated in the impossible mission but they did not do it. For Christ alone fed the 5,000. To me it seems He's making a point.

Because without the command do the impossible, the feeding of the 5,000 would be like the other miracles in the Bible where the purpose is to declare Jesus, God and King, and to unveil what His Kingdom is like. But with the command to do the impossible, Christ is also telling us to expect His call on us to do the impossible, and then expect to see Him do it for us. He says, *"You give them something to eat"* ... then He feeds them. Matthew reiterates this point in the following verses where Christ walks on the water.<sup>15</sup> The next day, after feeding the

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 6:37

<sup>14</sup> John 6:8-9

<sup>15</sup> Matt 14:22-33

5,000, Christ sends the disciples ahead by boat. But by evening the disciples are caught in a storm, so Christ being Christ walks on the water to them. And when they see Him, after they cry out in fear, Jesus says, *"It is I; do not be afraid."* To which Peter, perhaps with the previous day's events still fresh in his mind,

**Matt 14:28** – <sup>28</sup> (Peter answered Him and) ... said, "Lord, if it is You, (command the impossible and) command me to come to You on the water."

Christ obliges, saying, "Come." And when He does He has again commanded a disciple to do the impossible. Peter gets out of the boat, walks on the water for a few steps, and then sinks, crying out, "Lord save me." And Christ catches him by the hand and then they walk together on the water back to the boat. This is the gospel. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The normal Christian life is a mission-impossible Christ-dependent life.

### **Expect Christ To Deepen Our Faith in Him**

And the result will be belief, deepened faith in Him, the kind of faith marked by dependency upon Him and allegiance to Him. He will call us to do the impossible and when He does it for us, we will believe that He is the Christ, King of heaven and earth. The passage ends with Peter and Jesus walking on the water back to the boat, and when they get in, the disciples have their faith deepened.

**Matt 14:33** – <sup>33</sup> Then those who were on the boat came and worshipped Him saying, "Truly You are the Son of God."

The first time anyone has said this. After He commands them to do what they could not do, and then does it for them, He is glorified in their eyes. They finally, definitely recognize Him for who He really is, the Son of God, and their faith in Him deepens. Their expectations are now right and they are prepared for the future. Perhaps this is you today, like it is sometimes me. We are convinced He is the Savior King, the Son of God, but like the disciples, we can be more convinced as we see Him do more in our lives. They will see the resurrection, and later experience the impossible missions that He calls them to participate in and then does for them. And we will too. And our faith in Him will deepen.

The multitudes, on the other hand, have been sent away because, as another passage says, they were so taken by the miracle of food that they sought by force to make Christ a political king.<sup>16</sup> But Christ sends them away, for they have misunderstood His will. And until they understand His will and expect that He has not come to fix everything, but to save, to rescue, to free all who will be saved, they will be disappointed in Him. They don't understand Him yet, but many will. They don't have the right expectations now, but later many of them will. Perhaps this is you, like it is sometimes me. Perhaps you have disappointment in God, like me sometimes, and a weakened faith in Christ, a loss of joy and a hardening heart, because of the troubles that remain in life. Pray that He makes His will understandable, that we can have right expectations so that when it comes to pass, we may believe. And He will do it.

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<sup>16</sup> John 6:15, 6:26

Finally, the civic and religious leaders and doubting relatives aren't even there to witness the miracles. They've underestimated Him as King and many rejected Him. They aren't convinced. They don't see Him rightly, yet some will. Perhaps this is you, as it has been me. Maybe there is curiosity about Him. Maybe you are drawn to find out more about Him, to test if He is who the scriptures say He is. Maybe you know Christ is drawing you because you can't keep Him out of your mind. If this is you, pray that He reveal Himself to you and He will do it. I used to do prison ministry, and the common testimony of being saved in prison was just this, a prayer from the floor of the cell, "Jesus if you are real, show yourself to me." In every case, for those who are convinced, or who misunderstand His will, or who underestimate Him as King, it is Christ who deepens faith in Him, as He does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

### **Expect the Normal Christian Life to Be Mission Impossible**

That's the gospel, isn't it? God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Only God saves. He can command us to make disciples of all nations, but we can't make them be anything. We can only participate through prayer and preaching and testimony, as He saves them. Only God can make us righteousness. Only God can take away sins. Only God restores souls. Only God can change hearts. Only God leads us in the way we should go. Only God is sovereign over circumstances. Only God gives us joy. Only God makes life meaningful. Only God holds on to us. Only God satisfies. Only God grants us eternal life. For God alone makes a way and does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

The miracle of feeding the 5,000 just says to also expect God to command us do these very same impossible things, to make disciples, to save and be saved, to be righteous, to repent of sin, to be restored, to be changed, to forgive, to lead and be led in the way we should go, to be joyful, to make the most of the time because the days are evil, to hold on to God, to be satisfied, to be made alive, ... all impossible pursuits, that we can participate in, but cannot do for ourselves. So that when He does them for us, then we will see "*God glorified in the Son*" and we will "*rely not on ourselves but on God who raises from the dead.*" When we see the lost saved, and sad made joyful, the sinful repentant, and the hard-hearted softened, then we will declare to Christ the King, "*Truly, You are the Son of God.*"

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About 15 years ago I decided to tell my wife that she need to forgive someone, and the Lord said to me, "You do it first." I said, "but I'm not the one with the problem." I took a breath and said, "okay Lord, who should I forgive," and before I could say "who", He said in my mind, "your dad." And I just hung my head. I then began to pray, honestly, saying, "Lord, you have told me to forgive my dad, I want to but I can't do it, I don't know how, I don't have the power, I can't change my heart; You're going to have to do it for me." Incessantly I prayed this for two months and then for two days in the car driving to go visit my parents. Six days after arriving, we were hiking on a snowy New Mexico trail, and ahead were my parents walking together. At one point, as I looked ahead I heard the Lord say, "He too is a man just like you," which I knew to mean he is just as beloved and forgiven as me, and my heart was changed at that instant, so that for the first time I truly loved my father. God



commanded me to do mission impossible, to forgive my father, and while I participated in prayer, He did it for me by changing my heart.

This is the gospel. This is the normal Christian life. This is the right expectation in this day and age until He comes back, a mission-impossible life, lived dependent upon Christ, who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

*For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

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### **Questions for Further Thought**

- Q1 – Do I rightly recognize Christ as the King, ruler, sovereign over all human affairs including over every aspect of my life? Or do I wish to have more control over my life and over others as well?
- Q2 – Do I rightly understand Christ’s intention as King is to save sinners one-by-one now and vanquish the rebel-held fallen kingdom of this evil world later? Or do I wish for political and cultural solutions to the problem of evil in the world?
- Q3 – Do I see everything of lasting value in the Kingdom is impossible to accomplish without Christ? Or do I wish to accomplish something of lasting value of my own?
- Q4 – What are the impossible missions He has called me do to? How did He do what He called me to do for me? How did He make a way?
- Q5 – What do I think are the impossible missions He will call any of us to do? What will He call just me to do?
- Q6 – What one thing from this passage could I incorporate into my life? What one thing would strengthen my faith in Christ?
- Q7 – What does it mean, “When I am weak then I am strong.”