

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 6, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MARK 6:34-44

WHEN YOU NEED A MIRACLE
4. How God Turns a Little into a Lot

In this short series, we have looked at three miracles that God performed; and I want to start off this morning by asking you the question, “What do you need more of?” Someone says, “I need more patience”, or “I need more time”, or “I need more money”. Well, the Bible teaches, through this miracle that we’re going to study today, how God turns a little into a lot.

It’s the most famous miracle in the Bible — the feeding of the 5,000; and it’s the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. Actually, there must have been far more than 5,000. Mark tells us that there were 5,000 men in attendance, but Matthew 14:31 tells us that “the number of those who ate was about 5,000 men, besides women and children.” Now, presumably there would be a woman for every man and at least one child for every couple; so, you come up with a conservative estimate of 15,000 souls. So, it’s really the feeding of the 15,000.

I said last week that Jesus never performed a miracle just to show off. Each miracle taught at least one lesson, and through this miracle we’re examining today we see the four steps by which God turns a little into a lot.

I’ve written at the top of your outline a sentence that I would call “the basis for a miracle”.

“When there is a need, sensed by a few, and each individual accepts his responsibility to do what he can with what he has, regardless of the odds, then God works a miracle.” This is proven to be true with regard to every miracle in the Bible.

Today, in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, I want you to see how that truth is evidenced so clearly.

Now, the first thing you need to do if you’re going to let God turn a little into a lot in your life is:

1. You must first identify the problem. The problem is obvious here. There’s a large crowd; it’s a remote location; there’s nothing to eat —15,000 people out in the middle of the desert and no McDonalds! What are you going to do?

The point, folks, is that — every miracle begins with a problem. If you don’t have a problem, you don’t need a miracle! Now, it may be a physical problem, a spiritual problem, a material problem, a financial problem, a health problem; but it must be a legitimate problem for God to work a miracle.

So, do you have a problem this morning? If you do, do I have good news for you! Because if you have a legitimate problem, you are a candidate for a miracle. The starting point is to recognize there is a problem and a need.

2. The second step is to accept responsibility for that problem. God wants you to get concerned about the situation before He does anything about it. In verse 35 it says, “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.’” The disciples got concerned. They said, “Look, these people are hungry. What are we going to do?” They accepted the responsibility.

Now, tell me — Who saw the need first — the disciples or Jesus? It was Jesus, without a doubt. Obviously, He knew long in advance that they were going to have a problem with food before anyone else recognized it. But here’s the point — Jesus did nothing about the problem until the disciples got concerned. When they accepted responsibility, then He began to act.

Maybe you’re having a problem but you don’t even recognize it yet. God sees the problem, and He wants to work on it, but He will not work a miracle till first you recognize — “I’ve got a problem!” That’s the starting point, for example, in “Alcoholics Anonymous”. God saw your financial problem long before you saw it, but He waits for you to get concerned and accept the responsibility for it before He steps in to help.

God knew that we were going to need a new church long before we began to meet in this school! But, He waits on us to get concerned about it and to accept our corporate responsibility, because that’s part of the maturing process for a congregation of God’s people. Notice that the disciples finally saw the need, and they come to the Master, and they said, “Jesus, do something about this problem — 15,000 hungry people!” Look what Jesus’ response is in verse 37, “But He answered, ‘You give them something to eat!’”

Folks, it was a practically impossible assignment. How would you feel if you were facing an impossible situation, and Jesus said, “You do it! You be the solution!” He’s getting them to accept the responsibility. You see, even if they had all the hamburger, how are you going to fix 15,000 tacos that quickly?!

Not only was it practically impossible, it was financially impossible also. The disciples in verse 37 did a little cost analysis — “200 denarii to feed this many. Why, that’s eight months’ wages! We can’t afford that! We don’t have the kind of money!” Now figure it out in modern terms. If an average salary is \$30,000, eight months’ salary would be \$20,000; and divide that by 15,000, and it’s going to cost \$1.35 per person; “Jesus we can’t do it!” You see, their figures were right, but their faith was wrong!

What’s the point? The point is — God often asks us to do something that’s impossible. Jesus said, “You feed them!” Why does Jesus do that? Why does He ask us to do the impossible? Because it requires faith! If it wasn’t impossible, we would think we could do it on our own. The Bible says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). So, He stretches us by

asking us to do the impossible.

Now, there are three common reactions the people have toward problems; and these are the three reactions the disciples displayed in this impossible situation:

a. We procrastinate. Notice it says in verse 35, “By this time it was (what?) late in the day.” The disciples had all day to see the potential problem, but they did nothing. Jesus waited on them to get concerned. The question I have for you this morning is this — What difficult situation are you putting off? Procrastination never solves a problem; it only makes it worse.

b. We pass the buck. In verse 36 the disciples said, “Send the people away.” Out of sight, out of mind! Look the other way; pretend the problem doesn’t exist. Basically, the disciples were saying, “Hey, it’s not our problem. We didn’t invite these people to come out here to listen to Jesus. If they have a problem, they ought to solve it. It’s none of our business. If they’re hungry, let them go and find their own food!”

I think one of the biggest cop-outs is the phrase, “It’s none of my business.” You have a friend who is wasting his life. It is your business. You have a child who’s going in the wrong direction. It is your business. You’ve got someone you care about who’s on the point of making a wrong decision. It is your business. Love cares. So, don’t procrastinate; and don’t pass the buck.

c. We worry about major problems. In verse 37b the disciples say, “If we feed them, 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?” And the disciples’ anxiety goes into overdrive. “How could we ever afford to feed such a crowd of people? Who’s going to clean up the mess at the end of this big picnic?”

Now Jesus, the Solution to this whole dilemma, is standing right there with them: Jesus, Whom Satan knew could have turned stones into bread, is looking at them; and they’re looking for Colonel Sanders! They just weren’t thinking! Worry is the opposite of faith. It never solves problems; it just makes them worse.

So what do you do when you realize, “I need a miracle”? “I’ve got a problem: I accept responsibility for it; and I know that procrastinating or passing the buck or worrying about it doesn’t work.” What do you do? It brings you to Step 3 —

3. You do what you can and you do it with what you have. You see, God waits to see what we are going to do with what we have before He steps in. Verse 38 says, “‘How many loaves do you have?’, He asked. ‘Go and see.’ When they found out, they said, ‘Five (loaves) and two fish’”. Now John, in his account of the miracle, says that the hero of the story is a little boy. He was the only person who brought a sack lunch, and there he is with his little sandwiches in a Glad Bag, and he has five little barley loaves and two little fish; but he gave it all to Jesus, and Jesus worked a miracle from it.

Now, there are three things we can say about his little boy, and they are very important. You need to understand them if you're going to have a miracle in your life. Look at the three ways the little boy gave:

a. He gave what he had. He had barley loaves which was the cheapest kind of bread, and he gave a couple of little fish. But, he gave what he had. Folks, never underestimate what God can do through ordinary people and limited resources when it's given to Him in faith. The fact is, God is looking not for ability, but for availability. In 1 Cor. 1:27, Paul says that "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise." If you will make yourself available, God will wear you out! Do you want to be used by God? Do you want to see the power of God at work in your life? Just become available. It doesn't take a lot of talent. God likes to do extraordinary things through ordinary people. The little boy said, "Jesus, here's what I have; You can have it."

b. He gave God all that he had. All five loaves and both fish! He held nothing back. If you want a miracle in your life, you cannot hold anything back from God. What are you holding back from God? "God, I'll give You anything except this relationship." "God, I'll give You everything except a sacrificial gift of money." "I'll give You everything except my time, or this one little thing I want to hold on to." I've always been glad this little boy didn't "tithe" his lunch! "Jesus, here's a half slice of one barley loaf!" When Jesus asked him, he just gave it all without a moment's hesitation. He gave what he had; he gave all he had; and,

c. He gave it immediately. He didn't hesitate or wonder if he was doing the right thing. Now, why don't we give like that when we need a miracle? I think there are two reasons:

(1) We're worried that we might end up going hungry. "If I give Jesus my lunch, what am I going to eat?" I can just imagine any little boy asking that question. I have a ten-year-old grandson who can polish off two Big Macs without batting an eyelid, and I could well imagine him asking that question! And, what do we say? "Lord, I need every cent I've got just to make it." If I make this sacrifice for Jesus, what am I going to live on?" We really don't believe that God will take care of our needs if we give sacrificially to Him.

(2) The other reason is that we think — "What's the use?" It doesn't make sense. How can my little bit help?" Here are 15,000 people and one little boy with his bag lunch. I probably would have said if I'd been in his shoes that day, "Hey, why should I give my lunch? I'm going to eat it and not be hungry. But, even if I give it up, how is that going to help? It's only a drop in the bucket. How can my little bit help?" That, in fact, was Andrew's reaction. Look at John 6:9, "Andrew spoke up... 'how far will this go among so many?'"

Let me read our first statement again, "When there is a need, sensed by a few, and each individual accepts his responsibility to do what he can with what he has, regardless of the odds, then God works a miracle." Note that phrase, "regardless of the odds". It doesn't say, "This won't help much." It simply says, "I'll give it because it's what I've got."

Just imagine us asking you all to raise a half-a-million-dollars by July 31! Many must think, "What is my little contribution going to do? It's so insignificant." The fact is, it will

do a lot if Jesus sees that's what you have to give. 2 Cor. 8:12 (Phillips) says, "The important thing is to be willing to give as much as we can — that is what God accepts, and no one is asked to give what he has not got." That's why in our present campaign we're emphasizing the watchword —

"Not equal gifts, but equal sacrifice."

Everyone can give different amounts. Everyone is at a different level of financial strength.

Now, when we've recognized the problem; we've accepted responsibility for the problem; and we don't procrastinate or ignore it or pass the buck; and we don't worry about it, but instead, we do what we can with what we have, and we give our best to God, then Step 4 is:

4. Expect a miracle! Now, look at verse 39ff and see what happened -- "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. Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, Jesus 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. And they all ate and were satisfied..." Now, if that isn't a miracle, I don't know what is! I've often thought — if there were one event in the life of Jesus that I would like to have witnessed, it would be this — looking over His shoulder watching Him bless, multiply, divide and distribute all that food from what He had to start with!

You see, folks, God specializes in things that are humanly impossible. If ever you use that word "impossible", listen for a belly laugh from heaven. Remember Jeremiah 32:17, "Nothing is too hard for God!" Jesus said, "All things are possible for him who believes" (Mark 9:23), and "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). So, no matter how big your problem is, God can handle it. But, you must do your part.

Matthew 9:29 says, "According to your (what?) faith it will be done to you." Do you see what that verse is saying? It is saying that I get to choose how much God will do in my life. I get to choose how much God blesses me. You do too. "According to your faith it will be done to you." Do you want to believe God for a little? He will do a little in your life. Do you want to believe God for a miracle? He'll do a miracle in your life.

This story also teaches a principle that we find throughout the Bible. It is that you cannot out-give God. Look at verse 43, "And the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish." Can you imagine this little boy going home with 12 baskets of leftovers?! Do you think his mother was surprised?

Anytime you give sacrificially to God and say, "Jesus, here's my lunch," you always end up getting back more by way of either spiritual or material blessing. You cannot out-give God. That's why giving is really a test of faith.

Now, what is the central lesson of this story? Here is it — What we want God to do for

us, He waits to do through us. Jesus could have performed this miracle without the disciples or the little boy. He could have just said, “Manna”, and it would have rained manna. He could have fed everybody instantly. But, He didn’t because He likes to do miracles through people because it blesses them as they realize that they are the instruments through whom He performs miracles.

It’s surely obvious how appropriate this story is for what we’re facing as a church right now — the seemingly impossible task of raising half-a-million-dollars. I want to tell you, friends, I have really struggled with this. It is an incredibly awesome responsibility to lead you into a project like this. I don’t take this responsibility lightly, and it can only be done through a miracle. Sometimes I almost wish I was a pastor in Montana where you can buy land for a thousand dollars an acre! “Lord, why did You put me in one of the most expensive areas in the USA?”

But I know that God wants to do a miracle through His faithful people at Faith Church. All I ask you to do is to give your best. “When there is a need, sensed by a few, and each individual accepts his responsibility to do what he can with what he has regardless of the odds, then God works a miracle”. You can apply that truth to any area of your life.

How does it apply to our situation as a church? Look at verse 34, “When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” I go up to our site at Kingstowne quite often. I look down into the valley, and I visualize 20,000 people who will live there, all of whom need the Lord. God says to us as a church, “You feed them! You take care of their needs.” But, we’ve got a problem; we’ve got to build that building to cater for their needs. Every miracle begins with a problem. So, what are we going to do? As a church we have the exact same options the disciples had. We can procrastinate — “Hey, let’s just forget it! Let’s just wait a while!” Or, we can pass the buck — “Well, sure, we need the new buildings, but let’s get somebody else to pay for it. I’ve got my own commitments. Don’t expect me to sacrifice.” Or, we can worry about it — “Where on earth are we going to get that kind of money? How can we afford that?” We can do that, or we can accept the responsibility to do what we can with what we have; and expect Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord, to turn a little into a lot!

AMEN.