

Matthew 15 • Tradition versus God's Word

Teacher: Pastor Paul LeBoutillier
Life Bible Ministry

Matthew chapter 15. Let's start with prayer.

Father, we thank You so much for the opportunity this morning to gather in Your Name, to open our hearts to the Word of God, and to the ministry of Your Holy Spirit.

And Father God, I want to pray for Your people here today and even those who are watching us live, online, just for the needs that are represented by Your people today. And You know what those needs are and You know how best to meet them.

And so I pray that You would meet and You would touch people, and that You would speak to their hearts. And that You would help to tune our spiritual heart to Your voice.

Lord God, we're not accustomed to listening on a spiritual level, so we need Your help. We need You to guide us. We need You to direct us. And we look to You, Father, to do these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

All right. Matthew 15. It begins this way. *“Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ² “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.””* (ESV)

Stop there, just for a moment, and we're going to talk about this. What's going on. Obviously, the religious leaders have been hearing for some time about what Jesus is doing, what He's been saying, the miracles that have been happening. So they send a delegation from Jerusalem to basically interrogate Him and so forth.

But I want you to notice that they don't come to Jesus and say, tell us about the people whose lives have been touched. Tell us about the people who've been healed. Tell us about the people who've been encouraged. What do they come to say? How come your disciples don't wash their hands right? That's it. This is

what they're going to, this is their big, their big concern. Why aren't your disciples washing their hands correctly?

And this is, you see what legalism does. It leapfrogs over people and it cares more about rules, and the keeping of rules than it does people's hearts. People's lives. And so they want to know what it's all about.

And you'll notice here that they're referring to the traditions, and they even say it in verse 2. “*Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders?*” And the traditions they're referring to involved these elaborate rituals that were just complex as to how they were to wash their hands. Mark actually gives us a little more insight. Let me put this on the screen for you. From Mark chapter 7, it says,

Mark 7:3-4 (ESV)

...the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.

...the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, (and this is all the ritual they would add) holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, (he says) they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.

Even where they sit. You got to cleanse the chair. And there's nothing wrong with washing your hands, we all know that. But you'll notice that there's this one word that just keeps being repeated over and over again in both of these passages, and that's the word, tradition, or traditions.

And when we're talking about traditions here, we're dealing with rabbinical traditions. But tradition is an important word, isn't it? Let me put the definition up on the screen for you because it means,

Tradition (noun)

an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior, (such as a religious practice or a social custom)

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The rabbis over the years had developed this whole idea of how you were to wash and it was their interpretation of God's original commands. But because the rabbis had developed it, and because they had endorsed it over the years, these traditions eventually became elevated to the place where the people deemed them as no less important than God's very Word.

But see, the problem was it wasn't in God's Word. It wasn't part of God's Word. It was something that man came up with. Man devised it on his own. And what we usually do, and we've been guilty of doing this even today. Roman Catholicism has added tons of traditions. So has Protestantism. You can't point to the Roman Catholics and say they're the only ones that have added traditions to the Word of God. We've done it too so we're, we're equally at fault about that sort of thing.

But, traditions aren't really the problem in and of themselves. The issue with traditions, again, is when they become elevated. When they become equal to the Word of God. And in the issue or the case of the Jews, superior to the Word of God.

And that's why Jesus gives that rather terse response in verse 3. Look with me in your Bible. It says, *“He answered them, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?”*

You see, that exposes right there, the way He words that. He's telling you and me that they've not only taken their traditions and elevated them to the place of the Word of God, they've now usurped the Word of God. And so they've gotten to the point where they've begun to actually break God's Word to keep their traditions. As if that, I mean, it sounds crazy, doesn't it? But that's what was happening.

And He even goes on in verse 4 and following to explain. He gives them an example of how they're doing it. He says, *“For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’⁵ But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or his mother, “What you would have gained from me (and that’s talking about financial support) is given to God,”⁶ he need not honor his father.’ So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God.”*

You see, the Bible says, honor your father and mother, and back in Jesus's day, there was no such thing as a retirement system, or a pension, or something like that for people who were old and could no longer work. They relied on family to take care of them. It was a family oriented support system and it was a good one.

Well, it was a good one as long as you had family. I mean, for women who could not conceive, and then their husband passed away, sometimes those women would starve to death because they had no one to take care of them. You were totally dependent on family.

God incorporated that into the law. He said, honor your father and mother. (Exodus 20:12) And of course, we understand from that that taking care of parents in their old age when there are no other means to take care of them is a responsibility that's a good thing to take care of.

Well, the, the, the elders of Israel had created this loophole where if someone took the money that they were otherwise going to had been setting aside to take care of mom and dad in their old age, if they devoted that to God in a special offering, well, then they were excused from taking care of mom and dad in that case.

And so that's what Jesus is saying. He says, basically, you're calling null and void the command to honor father and mother for the sake of your tradition of devoting one's money instead to the Lord and so forth.

And so He says here in verse 7 and following, *“You hypocrites! (He said) Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:*

⁸ *“This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
⁹ in vain do they worship me, (look at this last phrase)
teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*

In other words, what He's saying there is, teaching as the Word of God, the commandments of men. You've taken your commandments and you've made them the Word of God. You're enforcing them on people as if it is the very Word of God, and it's not the Word of God.

But as I said before, it's not traditions that are the problem. We have traditions today but we don't elevate them to the place of the Word of God. If we did, then we'd be telling people, you must celebrate Christmas. Well, celebration of

Christmas is a tradition. It's not a commandment. And so if somebody chooses not to celebrate Christmas, that's between them and the Lord. I don't care. It's not my, it's not my job to judge them on things that aren't related to the Word of God. Right? It's not your job either.

We might pity them if they don't celebrate for all the wrong reasons, but if they simply choose not to do it, it's like, hey, whatever. You can still be a born again Christian, love the Lord with all your heart, and not celebrate Christmas. You really can. So, you see, we're not going to elevate our traditions. We're not going to bring them to the place of God's Word.

Let's keep reading. Verse 10. It says, *“And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.””*

And see what Jesus is saying here is, first of all, He's exposing the whole reason the Jews got into all of this elaborate tradition concerning the washing of hands. It's because they were afraid that their hands might be dirty, and they would touch the food, and they would ingest something that was unclean, and therefore it would defile the inner man. They believed that what you put in your mouth could affect you spiritually. Okay?

And so he's telling them here, listen, it's not what goes into your mouth that is going to make you unclean. It's what comes out of your mouth because you see what comes out of your mouth is what's in your heart.

Remember, that Scripture that says, *“out of the abundance of the heart... (the) mouth speaks.”* That's a little frightening sometimes when we think or hear what comes out of our mouths. But, this is the point that Jesus is making here.

He says in verse 12, *“Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” (and) ¹³ He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, (what happens, He says, they) both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” ¹⁶ And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this (that's what) defiles a person. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands (He says, no, that) does not defile (anybody) anyone.””* Not in the way that they're saying.

It's funny. Just this past week, I got a note from a gal who asked, wrote me, and asked if it was appropriate for Christians to eat halal meat. And halal meat is food or meat that is prepared according to Islamic standards. And she wrote in her note that she has many Muslim friends and so they go out to eat and they obviously pick a place to eat that serves halal food which is approved according to the Islamic religion.

And I basically responded to her the same way Jesus is responding here. I said, I said, honey, God is far more concerned with what you put in your heart than what you put in your mouth. I mean, what you put in your mouth might make you sick temporarily, but what you put in your heart, that's going to have a lasting impact. And I didn't say it. What I wanted to say was, honey, your friends are far more dangerous to you than the food you eat.

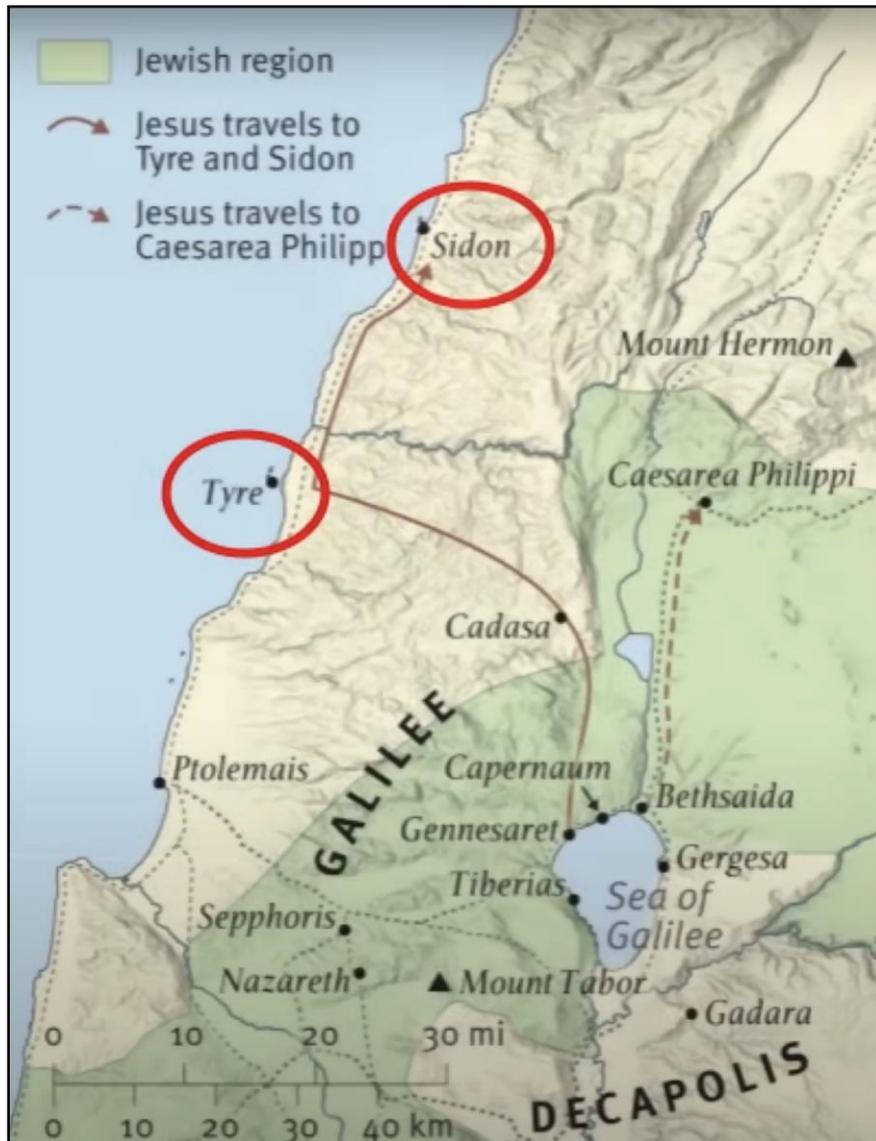
And it doesn't matter whether it's friends, or the movies we watch, or the books we read, or the music we listen to. All of that stuff goes into your heart and you have to know that your heart is like a garden. And you're planting seeds with what you're taking in and those seeds are going to grow.

They're going to sprout and when they do, the influence on your life is going to be manifest. And you're going to say things, and do things, and think things that may not be in keeping with what you want to say, do, and think. Or what you know the Lord would have you say, do, and think. And you're like, where, where did this come from? Well, I'll tell you where it came from. It came from all those plantings in your heart and so we really have to be careful.

But isn't it interesting, these Jewish legalists, they were all about things that just frankly didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

We move on here. Verse 21, it says, "*And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.*" No doubt just to get some rest from the Jewish authorities because He knew they wouldn't follow him there. Because Tyre and Sidon wasn't a Jewish region.

Let me put a map up just to give you a reminder of what we're talking about. You'll see the green area on that map, that's the areas during the life of time of Jesus that were inhabited mostly by the Jews, but I've circled the cities of Tyre and Sidon for you. And they're on the coast there and they were considered Phoenician cities.



And in fact, you remember Jezebel in the Old Testament who married one of the Jewish kings and brought Baal worship along with her. She was a Phoenician princess coming from the area of Tyre and Sidon. And so Tyre and Sidon was considered very, very, deeply rooted in paganism and Baal worship.

And so Jesus went there probably for a little bit of a vacation, just because, again, the religious leaders weren't going follow Him there.

But it says in verse 22, *“And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out (and they were referred to Canaanites, even though they were, this woman is Phoenician. It says) and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; ...”*

Did you notice that she's using the messianic title there of Jesus? Whenever He was referred to as the Son of David, that is a messianic title. They're basically

saying, have mercy on me, Messiah. Okay. This woman, even though she's a Syrophenician woman and probably comes from a thick pagan background, she knows some things that even the Jews have not yet embraced. Okay.

She cries out to Him, *“O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”* And so what happened, the deal is that her daughter literally was inhabited with the demon.

And by the way, even though the ESV uses the word, oppressed there, this is the Greek word for, inhabited. I don't really like the way the ESV renders it here. All the other modern translations say, possessed. The ESV, I don't know why they dumbed it down a little bit. I'm not sure why, because sometimes they'll take the exact same Greek word and they'll render it oppressed, and sometimes they'll call it possessed. As far as the ESV translators were concerned, those words were synonymous.

But anyway, it goes on here and it says in verse 23, *“But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came (eventually) and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.”²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”²⁶ And he answered, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.”²⁷ She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.”*

I have to tell you, I always have a little trepidation whenever I teach through this story because I inevitably get a note from someone who is really troubled by Jesus's response to this woman. And people are typically offended by the way Jesus treats her and I can understand some of it because His words do seem harsh to this woman. But there's so much that we don't understand.

First off, you do have to understand the fact that Jesus came, He appeared in His first coming, first to Israel. They are the ones who had received all the prophetic statements about the coming of Messiah. And it was Jesus, when He came the first time, who came specifically in answer to those prophecies. He came in a response to those promises made through Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and ultimately to David; king David.

And, and so Jesus even said here, He said, it's not appropriate to take what was intended for the children. And here He's referring to the nation of Israel. And to give it elsewhere because this is the plan, this is the purpose was to reach out

first to the Jews. Because you see, God had a plan for the Jews to receive the Gospel and then to evangelize the world. The problem is they rejected the bringer of the Gospel.

But beyond that, even though what some of the words that Jesus says to this woman, and the way He responds to her may seem harsh, maybe even mean, maybe even, you might even use the word cruel. The fact of the matter is He's putting her to the test and sometimes God tests us and we don't like that.

We don't like, I didn't like tests in school, did you? I mean, the worst thing a teacher could say was, put your books on the floor, take out a piece of paper and a pencil. That would just send shudders to this day through my spine. Because I did, I'll just tell you right now, as a student, I didn't test well in school. I just, I didn't. I had a sister who was straight A's, hated her for it and I was like straight D's. I was not a good student. I didn't like school and it was exacerbated as I've told you many times by the fact that my dad was the superintendent. But because people have expectations when your dad's in education and you're an idiot, frankly.

But tests are not fun. They're never fun, but the Bible tells us God tests us. But when we read, when we experience tests, even when we read about them in the Bible, we don't like to read about them. This is one of them. This is a test. This woman is being tested.

Remember the story in Genesis where Joseph is testing his brothers. They sell him into slavery, right? He ends up going into Egypt. He eventually becomes second to Pharaoh in Egypt. And then when his brothers food runs out because of a famine, they come to Egypt to buy some grain. They don't recognize Joseph. You remember the story.

He puts them through this series of tests, which is, it's hard to read in the Bible because you're like, dude, lighten up. It's like, these are your brothers and can't you see that they've changed? They're broken. But Joseph had to be sure. And so he put them through this series of tests to find out what was really going on in their heart. And if they'd really changed.

Well, we don't like that. Just don't do the test, God. Just, just rather not deal with that. But this is a test. You say, well, what kind of a test is it? Well, it's a test of perseverance. Is she going to give up? Is she going...

Because here's what Jesus does. She calls out to Him and at first He just ignores her. He doesn't even respond. You ever had that happen? You ever called out to

God and He didn't respond? You ever prayed and got back silence? How did you respond? Did you get angry? Did you get frustrated? Did you get sad? Did you give up? This lady didn't give up. And I think that's exactly what Jesus was doing.

And then even when He makes this statement about, well, it's not appropriate. It's not proper to give what belongs to the children and give it to their dogs. It's like, heavens to Betsy. Why did you have to say that? Because now He's not just ignoring her, now it sounds like He's rejecting her. That's worse yet. Have you ever been rejected? Have you ever felt rejected by God? What did you do? Did you give up? Or did you press in?

We read this story and some people are just immediately offended, but they don't know this woman. They don't know what her needs are. They don't know why Jesus was talking to her the way He was and testing her the way He was. They don't know the woman.

You want to know who did know the woman? Jesus. He knew her. He knew exactly what she needed to hear in order to press through the silence and the rejection, and to come to a place of standing firm in her faith even when everything said, just give up and go home. Your daughter is going to be possessed for the rest of her life. There's nothing you can do about it. Just forget it. This guy isn't helping.

But that's not what she did, is it? She kept going. She kept going. And when she heard those words that we might call rejection about taking the bread and giving it to the dogs, her response was, yeah, but you know what? Even the dogs eat what the children drop below the table.

And did you notice that Jesus, Jesus responded by commending her for having great faith. And then He took one other step, didn't He? He healed her daughter and she was set free from that moment forth.

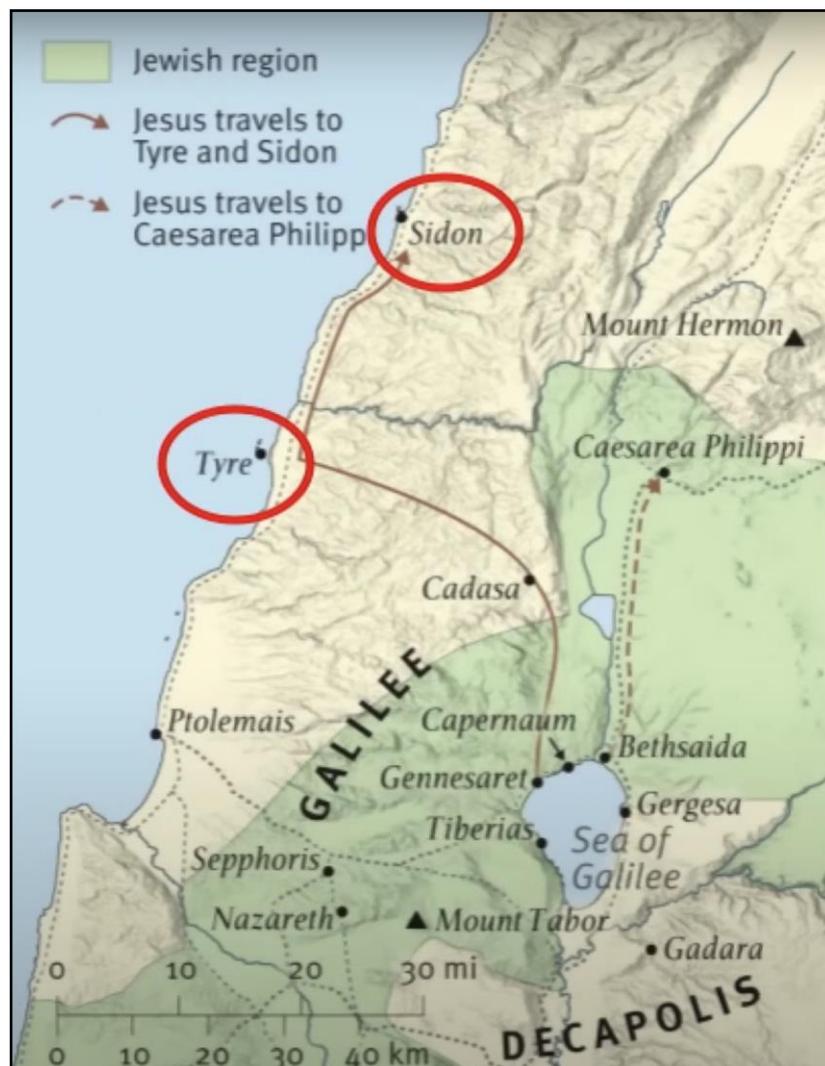
And so you see the whole thing worked out well, but boy, I tell you, we were kind of wondering there for a minute, weren't we? And maybe some of you might've read that passage and thought, well, I don't know, I thought God was good until I read that passage.

Well, you know what? She never gave up. The woman who heard those words never gave up. So I guess I have to ask you, what do you think about that? What do you think about when you pray and you don't hear anything back? And you feel that your prayer has been rejected. What do you do?

I think this is an example for all of us and, and Jesus actually taught elsewhere that when you come up against trouble, when you're making a request of God, keep going, keep pressing in, keep knocking. Important lesson.

Verse 29. *“Jesus went on from there and walked beside the Sea of Galilee.”* That was quite a walk. Let me put the map back up on the screen.

You can see once again, those circled areas where he had been hanging out for a little bit of a respite, and now He's back to that body of water toward the bottom of the screen where the sea of Galilee is. So that's a pretty good hoof back to that area.



And we're told that, *“...he went up on the mountain and sat down there.”*³⁰ *And great crowds came to him, bringing with them the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them,*³¹ *so that the crowd wondered, (or as the New King James says, the crowd*

marveled) when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel.”

Verse 32, “Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”³³ And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd?””

And that comment right there tells you that they learned nothing from the last chapter that we studied when Jesus healed an even bigger multitude of people, miraculously. It's almost like they weren't there, or they weren't paying attention. I mean, they knew how little bread and fish they had, and Jesus had everybody sit down.

We talked last week and said that crowd could have easily been 15,000 people. And so He had them all sit down and they started distributing the food and they knew that it wouldn't go past the first few people. And yet it fed everyone and they picked up multiple basketfuls of pieces and scraps afterwards.

And you would have think that that would have had such an impact on them that they would have said, well, here we go again. We got another miracle in the making. Jesus, wants to feed this crowd. We don't have enough food, but we know He can do it. Right? No. They're like, what are you talking about? What do you mean feed the crowd. They're just, it's so incredible.

Verse 34, “And Jesus said to them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven, and a few small fish.”³⁵ And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground,³⁶ he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.³⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied.”

Do you know that word satisfied is often used to describe a fattened calf? It means they had a lot. There was an abundance and everybody ate until they were full.

And they, not only that, but “...they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.³⁸ Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children.³⁹ And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.” Which is a variant spelling of Magdala, the place where Mary Magdalene was from.

And so the chapter ends on this note of another demonstration of God's miraculous provision, and it's very cool. It's almost described for you and me in a ho hum sort of a way. It's like, well, they didn't have enough food, but Jesus made enough food, and then He fed them all. And they were full, and then it was cool. And then they went home or whatever. But it was a miracle.

But here's the thing I really want to point out to you. Verse 32. Look that again in your Bible. It says, *“Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion on the crowd...”*

We talked about this last week. We mentioned it semi briefly as we talked about compassion. But here's the point that I want to make to you this morning. The Gospels portray Jesus as expressing several different emotions throughout the pages of Scripture. Sorrow, thankfulness, anger, zeal, several different sorts of emotional responses.

But did you know that compassion is mentioned more often than any other emotional response by Jesus? The Bible more often describes Jesus as being compassionate than anything else. I think that's interesting because you see the whole concept of compassion is really just the ability to sympathize with someone's condition, circumstances, situation. You're going through a hard time. I sympathize, I have compassion for you. Jesus had compassion. It expresses His compassion more often.

And here's why that's important. You want somebody who represents you to understand what you're going through, don't you? We get frustrated from time to time when our politicians don't seem to understand the life that we live.

Here we are, and some of you guys are in Idaho, some of you live in Oregon. About half our church lives in each state. And yet we all, we have representatives that represent us on the state level and on the federal level. And there are times, aren't there, that we've, we've been concerned that these representatives really don't know what life is like where we live.

They all tend to live in the big cities and they think in more metropolitan terms. And they don't really understand rural America and the kind of issues and needs and concerns that people in smaller regions have. And so, we get frustrated sometimes about our representatives. And, yeah, talk about them like that. Well, that's frustrating, isn't it?

Now, I want you to take that several levels higher than simply someone representing you in the government. Jesus represents you before the Father.

Because, you see, He is our high priest and that's what a high priest does. The picture of a high priest in the Old Testament is someone who represents the people to God. In other words, He goes to God on behalf of the people, okay? That's what a high priest does.

Jesus is our high priest, therefore, He represents you to the Father. Not only that, the Bible tells us that He is constantly interceding for the saints. Isn't that cool? Jesus is talking to the Father on your behalf.

Now you want to make sure that whoever's talking to God the Father on your behalf understands your behalf, right? You want to make sure whoever's representing you, and it is Jesus, knows what your life is like. And you see this whole thing is why the author of the Book of Hebrews wrote what he did in the fourth chapter. Let me put this up on the screen for you. It says,

Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV84)

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who's been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize (or have compassion) with our weaknesses, but we have one who's been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Do you ever have times of need? What a stupid question. We all do quite often. So what are you going to do? The writer of Hebrews says, hey, put your confidence in the One who represents you before the Father because He knows, He knows what life is like.

God became a man and experienced what it means to be a human being. And to suffer all of the temptations and difficulties and challenges that we suffer. The only difference is He was without sin. But that's why He's able to represent you before the Father. But He has compassion. He sympathizes. He knows.

You don't have to go to Jesus and explain how you're feeling. He's like, I know. I know. I know how you're feeling. And I'm talking to the Father about you and

what you're going through. What's happening in your heart, in your life, in your mind, in your body. I'm talking to the Father about that because I know what that's like and that's a good thing, amen?

Let's stand together. We'll close in prayer. If you need some personal prayer, we'll have our prayer team up here to pray with you after the service.

Father, we thank You so much. We thank You so much that Your Word speaks to our hearts. But we know, Lord, it's through Your Holy Spirit who communicates on a spiritual level the truths and wisdom that are bound up in the Scriptures.

And we know, Lord, that it is through Your Spirit that you are unlocking mysteries and wonders and glorious truths that set us free, that nourish us, that fill us, and that equip us for the days ahead.

Lord, we thank You so much for the love that You've poured out into our lives, into our hearts. We thank You, Lord, that You are so desirous to speak to us and speak words of grace and insight.

And we ask you to keep doing that, Lord. Keep speaking and help us to keep listening. Help us to press in, to hear You, to hear Your voice.

We thank You, we praise You, we worship You. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, and all God's people said together, amen.

Have a good rest of your day.