

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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What Can I Do?: The Boy with the Loaves and Fish - John 6:1-14

“What can I do?” Have you ever asked that question? I used to ask it frequently when I was a little boy helping my dad with some task or project. I was eager to help, but secretly worried that I would be thought too small to be allowed to do any of the really exciting stuff. Oh, to be old enough to be let loose with the hammer or the electric drill! To his credit, and probably mum’s terror, dad always found some way to involve his little boy and make sure that I felt involved and shared a sense of achievement when the job was done.

Today we begin a series of three talks with the title ‘What can I do?’ We will consider three people who, to most observers, probably seemed to have very little to offer anybody. In fact, they hardly had enough for themselves. However, from God’s point of view they had the huge advantage of showing trust in Him and letting Him use the very little they had.

Our first character, and our subject for today, is the boy whose five loaves and two small fish the Lord Jesus used to feed over five thousand people. We will follow the account in John 6:1-14.

Let’s meet our cast of characters:

Firstly, we have a large group of people: thousands of them. They have all come to listen to Jesus of Nazareth speak. He has a wonderful way of communicating, quite unlike any of the other teachers and preachers they have heard. Some of the crowd are genuinely attracted by this very special Man, but not a few of them are really just hoping to see some great miracle. Whatever their motives, it is getting late in the day and they are all getting tired and hungry.

Next we have the disciples: specially chosen to be with Jesus, their Messiah. They have followed Jesus faithfully for some time now, and heard and seen many things that have shown them that the One they follow is the Lord and Master of the whole universe. However, despite all that they have received, they have nothing to give the crowd at all, not so much as a crumb.

Then we have the Lord Jesus Himself: the Son of God fully equal with God the Father. He knows exactly what the needs of the crowd are, and is perfectly capable of meeting them without any help from anyone. As God, He is entirely self sufficient.

Finally, we have our young lad. We know next to nothing about him: no name, no family background. He seems to be nobody special, not very well off and the proud possessor of five barley loaves and two small fish.

Let’s read part of the story from John 6:1. “After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near.”

We will notice seven points as we go through this story:

1. There is a great need
2. Jesus knows what He will do
3. The situation is beyond the disciples
4. One boy has a little to offer
5. Jesus unfolds His plan
6. Every need is completely satisfied and there is plenty to spare
7. Jesus is honoured.

1. There is a great need

Let’s read from verse 5, “Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?’ But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He

would do. Philip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.’”

Five thousand men, besides women and children, are up a mountain, far from any shops and houses. Nobody seems to have planned how they will eat. The need is obvious and immediate. But Jesus sees another need. In Mark’s account, Jesus describes the crowd as “sheep without a shepherd.” The people need leading to God; they need teaching about God and keeping in the right way. They need to be saved, and then they need to be taught, kept, encouraged and fed. The spiritual need is even greater than the physical need, and it is just as immediate.

Can you see a need today? Do you look around and see people who need to hear the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ? Perhaps you see children that need somebody to teach them God’s word simply, so that they can understand and believe. Or maybe you see lonely people who need a visit and some encouragement. Perhaps you can see practical things that need doing in your meeting room, church or chapel. Maybe you know of a prison that needs visiting or a struggling family that needs a little practical help. If we are not walking around with our eyes closed, or totally focused on ourselves, we will see urgent needs in the Church and in the world wherever we look. It is time we asked the question, “What can I do?”

2. Jesus knows what He will do

We read that Jesus “knew what He would do”. Of course, God sees every need that we see, and probably many more beside. Being God, He is never surprised by a situation and always ready to respond. On this occasion though, Jesus does not meet the need straight away. He decides to test the faith of Philip, and so asks him what they should do. In our day too, God does not immediately meet every need, even when we might have prayed to Him about it. Our Father wants us to exercise our faith and show that we really do know Him well enough to trust Him, even when the circumstances seem very unpromising. Often He wants us to do something practical as well, but we shall come to that in a minute.

3. The situation is beyond the disciples

Frankly, Philip and the rest of the disciples flunk the test pretty badly. Philip sees the need all right; the trouble is that that is all he can see! He is overwhelmed by the scale of the situation. Before we smile knowingly at Philip’s puny faith, and wonder why he could not see what was coming next, we need to look at our own reactions. How often have we been overwhelmed by some, impossible to meet, need? Maybe the need was just too big, too many people, too much money required, or maybe it just seemed impossible to know how to help, or where to start. So, instead of starting, we quietly gave up and tried to be busy with something else to stop ourselves feeling guilty. Just like Philip, we have a knack of seeing the need but failing to notice that we also have the Lord Jesus with us, who has proved, time after time, just what He can do.

4. One boy has a little to offer

Let’s read from verse 8, “One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to [Jesus], ‘There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?’”

Step forward the young boy! At last we find somebody willing to do something practical about the situation. He offers his full supplies, namely five barley loaves and two small fish. Barley loaves were the rough food of the common people. If you could afford it you ate wheat bread. We are left in no doubt about the fish, they are *small*. Andrew’s question seems reasonable enough, “What are they among so many?” The maths seems pretty conclusive: that will be one thousandth of a loaf each and an even smaller fraction of a small fish. No danger of over eating today then! The maths might be correct but it misses the point. Finally Jesus has found somebody who is willing to give. *How much* the boy is able to give is irrelevant. He is willing to do his tiny part and leave the rest to the Lord Jesus. We urgently need to learn this lesson for ourselves. God did not save us because He needed our help, or what we can supply. The creator of all is not worried if my wallet contains one pound or one thousand pounds. He just wants me to open it! God did not want Moses’ eloquence when He called him; Moses did not have any anyway. He wanted Moses to be willing to just pass on the message he was given. God does not actually want us to do ‘great things’; *God* will do the great things if we do very little things in faith. We are reminded in 1 Thessalonians 5:24 where the strength will come from: “The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.”

5. Jesus unfolds His plan

Let’s read from verse 10: “Then Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise of the fish, as much as they wanted.”

We see that, despite their lack of faith, Jesus still wants to make the disciples part of the delivery mechanism for His blessing. It is the disciples who are asked to instruct the people to sit, and to distribute the food that Jesus will supply. How typically gracious of the Lord this is! Even when we have failed, He does not push us to one side and manage without us. He is unbelievably patient and always ready to involve us. If a dad can be prepared to involve his young son in some little project, the Lord Jesus is infinitely more patient and willing to include us in His plans. To their credit, the disciples do not sulk, or ask foolish questions; they just do as they are told. When we have failed in some way, do we sulk in a corner, or give up, in despair at our own hopelessness? Actually the Lord knows how hopeless we are before we realise it. Perhaps He is trying to show us how powerless we are by ourselves. We need to learn with Paul that God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

6. Every need is completely satisfied and there is plenty to spare

Let's read from verse 12 of our chapter, "So when they were filled, [Jesus] said to His disciples, 'Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.' Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, 'This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.'"

So much for the maths of division; five thousand into five does not go! Now we see multiplication in action! Five and two are multiplied any number of times, to provide more than sufficient to meet the need. There is no doubt this is a miracle, a sign to use the word characteristic of John's Gospel; something that shows that Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, the Son of God. Again, how typical it is of the Lord Jesus that, not only does everybody receive, "as much as they wanted", but the leftovers fill twelve baskets! Do we despair of God being able to meet the needs we see? Then we do not know Him very well. He is able and willing to more than meet the need. Perhaps He is waiting for you to provide the five barley loaves and two small fish. We need to face the fact that the God revealed in the Bible is a God of plenty, who blesses beyond expectation. This raises the question of why so many of us see and experience so little blessing. One thing is certain, God has not run low on resources. We have to look at ourselves and see whether we really want His best things for us. If our lives are already full of many other things that we are not prepared to let go, then it is no great surprise that we do not experience much of God's blessing. After the great miracle that we have read, many of the people followed Jesus just because they wanted another free meal! The Lord was more interested in feeding their spirits than their bodies and when He speaks about how this would require His death, many stop following. Our Lord is well aware of our physical needs and, as our story shows, happy to meet them. Our problems come when we devote almost all of our time and energy to meeting our desires and find that we are never satisfied. God designed us so that we can only be properly satisfied by knowing and serving Him.

7. Jesus is honoured

As a result of this miracle, the people proclaim that Jesus must be the Prophet that Moses said God would raise up, see Deuteronomy 18:15. Subsequent events show that this conviction may have been rather shallow for many of them, but the fact remains that the incident results in honour being given to the Lord Jesus. We do not read about anybody thanking or praising the boy who supplied the bread and fish, but that seems fitting. When God wants to do something great, He is often at great pains to plan the means so that all the glory and honour come to Him. Think about the great victory Israel had under Gideon. You can read the account in Judges 7. Gideon's army started out with 32,000 men, few enough to fight an army too vast to count. God reduced these to 10,000 and still declared that this was too many for Him to use. Finally the numbers are reduced to 300 and God is satisfied. Think about it! We are often asking God for greater numbers, more money, or more strength so that He can use us. It seems that God would rather have a handful of people who are ready to trust Him and give the little that they have for Him to use. Do we want to do great things for God so that people will be impressed with us? Do we think in terms of what we have to offer God? If so, we need to put our own pride and dreams on one side and put ourselves in a position where God is able to use us. "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." Colossians 3:17.

Perhaps it is sometimes better to ask, "What can God do?" The answer of Paul in Ephesians 3:20 is "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." We are apt to think that God only works through missionaries and great preachers, exceptional leaders and people of 'great faith'. The God who has all resources at His disposal, surely chooses the most brilliantly gifted people as channels for His blessing. In fact, He does nothing of the kind. 1 Corinthians 1:26 points out that "not many wise men according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called". It seems that the Almighty God prefers to work through very ordinary people. He chooses people like you and me to work for Him. Of course, we are not promised miraculous results in everything that we do. Many of us in our working lives are told to focus on 'results' and contribute to these in every way that we can. God's emphasis is quite different. God makes Himself solely responsible for results. We are responsible for our faithfulness. Sometimes we are allowed to see immediate and dramatic results; sometimes we see little fruit for years. The Lord knows what He is doing.

If we want to be like the young lad in our story we all urgently need to do six things...

1. We must see the need

Let's not walk around oblivious to the needs all around us. The Lord Jesus was moved time and again by the many needs He saw, and was never slow to respond. We need to ask the Lord to open our eyes to the needs He wants us to do something about.

2. We must trust God

Focusing all our attention on the need will lead to disillusionment and inaction. We need to be constantly reminded that the One we serve is infinitely greater than the need. Do we think that we care more than God, or that He has not fully understood the situation? As soon as we put it in those terms, we see how foolish we are being. Let's recognise that God wants to bless and think how we can let Him use us.

3. We must acknowledge our own limitations

We are not asked to deceive ourselves. If all we have to offer is barley loaves and small fish, then let us gladly acknowledge that. It is no good thinking "If only I had thousands of wheat loaves to offer; or lamb, honey and grapes." We are called to give what we have, not what we don't have. Never let us be tempted to wait until we know more, or have more, before we start doing things for the Lord. God certainly is not dependent on our help. In His great grace, He patiently waits for us to do our little part. Let us not keep Him waiting too long.

4. We must want to see blessing

Surely we all want to see blessing. Nobody wants to see unmet needs everywhere. Maybe our problem is that we are far too comfortable as we are. Blessing implies change. Meeting needs implies my doing something. I can be perfectly comfortable with my self-centred Christian life. My salvation is secure, my church suits me well and I am coasting gently through life. Many of us unwittingly settle down into this pattern but it bears no similarity to the Christianity of the New Testament. We need to re-examine our lives and our priorities in the light of God's word and re-ignite a desire for God's intervention in blessing.

5. We must care deeply about other people

The Lord Jesus could not look at individuals or crowds without caring about them and wanting the best for them. His care was passionate and resulted in actions as well as words. Most of us live in a deeply selfish society and it is frightening how much this has influenced us. Too many of us are doing our own thing; concerned with our self image and self worth; pursuing 'me time' and self fulfilment. It is impossible to think of the Lord Jesus indulging in any of these things. When we ask, "What can I do?" it needs to spring from a deep, God given care for those around us. We need to pray for the best things for our fellow Christians, not because it will make our church more pleasant, but because it will be for their great benefit, and Christ's glory. We need to move chairs and clean windows, not because nobody else will, but because it is a simple way we can help our brothers and sisters. We need to tell a friend about the salvation to be found in Jesus Christ, not because we are gifted evangelists but because the Lord has given us this special opportunity, and we are really concerned about where our friend is going to spend eternity.

6. We must do something where we are now

Take this advice offered by a missionary to Africa, "Ask the Lord to use you right where you are. Do whatever He gives you to do with all your heart. Learn to be patient and content serving Him in your neighbourhood, among family, friends and co-workers. So much valuable ability is wasted because potential servants are waiting to serve somewhere else."

If God has put in your heart a desire to do something for Him, be glad that He has done so, and act now! Stop thinking about how impossibly large the need is and how little you have to offer. Take a leaf out of the book of a young lad who lived near the Sea of Galilee, and who put the little that he had into the hands of Jesus and saw the greatness of His power. Something tells me he never regretted doing it, neither will you!

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