

## Needless Repetition? Matthew 15:29-38

Why does Matthew record the story of the feeding of the 4000, only one chapter after describing the feeding of the 5000? Remember, the gospel writers had to be very selective with the stories about Jesus that they chose to include in their narratives – in the Ancient World, papyrus was expensive and column inches were precious. So why the repetition?

Well, perhaps one reason reflects another reality of the Ancient World – people didn't travel as much as we do. That's one reason why Jesus went around to so many different towns and villages, so that many people could experience His miracles and hear His teaching. It is thus very likely that Jesus repeated many of the same stories and lessons in slightly different ways, just as He performed similar miracles before different audiences. This, by the way, helps to explain some of the so-called discrepancies between some of the similar stories about Jesus told in different gospels. It's not that the gospel writers were adding embellishments – it's more likely that they were accurately recording some of the slightly different ways that Jesus taught the same lesson.

Of course, we can also explain Matthew's inclusion of the feeding of the 4000 as an important piece in the literary design of chapter 15. We first discovered this structure at the beginning of the chapter when the Pharisees confronted Jesus and His disciples about their failure to follow all the traditions that their ancestors had dreamed up. In response, Jesus drew their attention to Isaiah 29, pointing out that they themselves were the ones who deserved judgment, substituting as they did the commandments of men for the Law of God.

Now, the following verses from Isaiah 29 go on to say that God would answer such presumptuous hypocrites by displaying His miraculous power among them. And as we have seen over the last few weeks, the rest of Matthew 15 shows Jesus fulfilling this prophecy, performing the same miracles in much the same order that Isaiah 29 describes.

And the structure is pretty obvious, once you know to look for it: Isaiah 29:17 says that God will transform Lebanon into a fruitful field, and immediately after Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, He casts a demon out of a girl near Tyre and Sidon, which are in Lebanon. Isaiah 29:18 next says that the deaf shall hear and the eyes of the blind shall see, and right after returning from Lebanon, Jesus heals all sorts of people, which we see in verses 30 and 31 in today's passage. Isaiah 29:19 then says that the humble and the poor shall rejoice, and that's exactly what we see beginning in verse 32 of today's passage, as those who haven't had anything to eat for days enjoy the full meal that Jesus provides for them.

Okay, so why is it so important that Jesus acts out the miracles that Isaiah predicted? Isaiah 29:14 says that it is the Lord Who will do all these wondrous works among the people. Moreover, Isaiah 29:19 says that it is the Holy One of Israel in Whom the poor will rejoice. In other words, by performing all these miracles, Jesus is making a clear claim to be not just a teacher, and not just a miracle-working prophet, but the Lord Who spoke to Isaiah, a claim to be the Holy One of Israel, a claim to be God Almighty.

And the whole of today's passage makes it plain that Jesus is in fact the One doing these miracles, that He Himself is the source of all this divine power. For think about it: do we see Jesus in

fervent prayer, asking God to heal all these people or to provide bread for them? That's the sort of thing the Old Testament prophets had to do. Because they were only messengers from God, they could only do what the Lord allowed, and could only say what the Lord had already told them.

But Jesus' power was not derivative, was it? For Matthew simply reports that when the great multitudes brought those who were lame, crippled, blind and dumb to Jesus, He healed them. And the people had no doubt about Jesus' tremendous power, for when they saw the dumb speaking, the cripples restored, the lame walking and the blind seeing, they recognized that His power came from a divine source. Even if they didn't fully understand Who Jesus was, they did give glory to the God of Israel.

Okay, so one reason that Matthew includes the story of the feeding of the 4000, in large measure repeating himself, is so that we'll believe in the divinity of Jesus. But there's another reason that Biblical writers sometimes repeat similar content – noticing the similarities as well as the differences between lessons or stories draws our attention to some of their most important details.

And there are many similarities between the stories of Jesus feeding the 5000 and the 4000, aren't there? In both cases, for example, the disciples expressed disbelief that a huge crowd could possibly be fed in such a remote area. In both cases, when the disciples examined how much bread was available, there was not nearly enough to go around. On both occasions, Jesus had the multitude sit on the ground as if to prepare for dinner, without first explaining what was going to happen. In both cases, Jesus gave thanks for the food, broke the bread, and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the people. In both cases all the people ate and were filled. In both cases, there were a lot more leftovers than Jesus started with. In short, the similarities between the feeding miracles all serve to underline the main point of chapter 15 – that Jesus wields the amazing power of the divine Son of God.

Ah, but what about the differences between the two stories? The amounts of food are of course different – starting with five or seven loaves and ending up with twelve or seven baskets of leftovers – but that seems to be a mere mathematical detail. It's really just as amazing for Jesus to feed five thousand families with five loaves as it is for Him to feed four thousand families with seven loaves. Again, both banquets make it clear that, in Jesus' divine power, He can clearly provide whatever is necessary, indeed much more than enough.

But there's another difference between the two stories – the description of the initial situation. For think about it: the crowd of five thousand families that Jesus fed back in chapter 14 seems to have gathered spontaneously over the course of one hectic day. As a result, many of them may very well have had breakfast before they started out on their journey. And in suggesting that Jesus send the people away to get something to eat, the disciples obviously considered it quite possible that they could all make their way back to their homes without too much difficulty.

In contrast, the situation in chapter 15 is much more dire. Although the crowd was somewhat smaller, 4000 in comparison to 5000 families, Jesus indicates that they had all been with Him for three days. In fact, they had gone without food for so long that many of them would not have been able to make it home. Instead, in their weakened condition He thought many of them would pass out along the way.

And that draws another contrast between the two stories – who first noticed that the crowd needed something to eat? In chapter 14 it was the disciples who informed Jesus of the lateness of the hour and of what they considered to be the impossibility of providing for all those people. So, why didn't they tell Jesus the same thing in chapter 15? In fact, since they had already seen Jesus perform one such miracle, why didn't they suggest that He do the same thing on the first or the second day that the chapter 15 crowd was with them?

We find the answer in one more of the similarities between the two miraculous banquets – the compassion of Christ – and illustrating that compassion thus seems to be a main reason for Matthew including both of these stories in his gospel.

We certainly see Jesus' compassion in chapter 14, don't we? After all, Jesus had just learned about the horrible death of John the Baptist, and so He had withdrawn to what promised to be a quiet, solitary place. But that's when a huge crowd had shown up, preempting Jesus' time for meditation and prayer. And so, instead of being irritated at having to change His plans, Jesus chose to spend time teaching and healing those who had barged in uninvited. And why? Because Matthew 14:14 says that He felt compassion for them. And in verse 32 of chapter 15, we see Jesus making the same point concerning the second hungry crowd, this time in His own words: "I have compassion on the multitude."

But here is perhaps a more sobering point: Jesus' compassion is all the more striking when we compare it to the disciples' apparent lack of concern for the needy. After all, Jesus is the One Who is willing to get personally, physically involved with the needs of all the sick people in verses 30 and 31. Moreover, Jesus is the One Who not only notices the hunger of the crowd but Who does something about it. And what are the disciples doing? Chapter 15 verse 33 says that they don't have any confidence that anything can be done for the crowd, even though they themselves participated in an almost identical miracle only one chapter previously.

So, what about us? Sure, we know the main points that Matthew is trying to make in chapter 15. We know that Jesus is the divine Son of God, the Messiah predicted by the prophets, the Holy One of Israel. We know that what John said about Him in our responsive reading is true – that He is the very Word of God by whom all things were made. But at the same time, we know that His compassion, His love for sinners like us is so great that He chose to take on flesh, to suffer and die so that those who trust in Him might be saved.

Yes, we confess those great truths every Lord's Day when we recite the Apostles' Creed. And in the Westminster Confession of Faith, all of us Evangelical Presbyterians affirm the same thing: "The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, is truly the eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father. In the fullness of time he took on himself the nature of man, with all the essential qualities and ordinary frailties of man – except that he was sinless.... By His perfect obedience and sacrifice, offered up to God once and for all through the eternal Spirit, the Lord Jesus has completely satisfied the justice of His Father and purchased not only reconciliation but also an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for everyone whom the Father has given to Him."

Yes, we're good Presbyterians, and we say we believe all this. We say we believe in Jesus' identity as the Son of God. We say we believe in His power and His love. But are these great truths really making a difference in our everyday lives?

Think about it: we see Jesus' divine power so clearly demonstrated in today's passage, the power to heal the sick and the power to provide for all our material needs. But are we really trusting Him to do those sorts of things for us and for our loved ones? Or instead do we give ourselves over to the commonsensical stoicism of the disciples, having no real confidence that God can solve any of our real-world problems?

And then there's the truth of Jesus' compassion, Jesus' willingness to get personally involved in meeting the needs of others. Remember, He's the One Who took the initiative to solve the people's problem by breaking the bread for the hungry. In fact, He's the One Who took the initiative to save a world full of sinners like us, going so far as to take on human flesh and to give up His life for those who abandoned and rejected Him.

So, how about us? Sure, we're generous with our funds, helping plant churches in other towns, and supporting missionaries in other countries. We're indirectly involved in lots of important Kingdom work. But what are we ourselves doing here, in this place, for the suffering people around us? In our daily lives, how are we personally demonstrating our compassion for the lost, the lonely, the left out?

And if we're not really trusting Jesus to solve our most serious problems, and if we're not that interested in helping others with their needs, maybe the underlying problem is that we really haven't learned the lessons that Matthew is trying to teach us after all. Maybe, deep down, our problem is that we really don't believe in God's power or in God's love.

And maybe that's the most important reason Matthew chooses to include such repetitions in his gospel, the same reason that teachers often have to go over the same material so many times – because we didn't get it the first time, and it's really, really important.

So maybe a little repetition would do all of us some good: Jesus, the Son of God, really does have all power in heaven and earth, ruling and reigning even over the most intractable problems that come our way, able to meet even our most urgent needs. And Jesus, the Son of Man, has proven His everlasting, unconditional love for us by the blood of His cross, laying down His life so that sinners like us could be saved. That's the truth, and it's really, really important. Are we listening? Do we really believe it? And will we let that truth change our lives?