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What Are These Among So Many?

995-B

Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Less What Are These Among So Many?

Jesus has commissioned the twelve and sent them out. Two by two He sent them out. With clear warnings He sent them out. With untold power He sent them out. Never in history had an endeavor had a more honest beginning. The Master not only told them of the power they would possess, He also told them of the conflicts they would encounter. He told them of the hatred that would rear its ugly head whenever the name “Jesus” was spoken. He told them how brother would rise up against brother, father against son, mother against daughter whenever clear decisions were made that involved the yielding of a life to Jesus Christ.

This is all the more proof that accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is not some vague and immeasurable progression that involves being raised in the church and attending Sunday School. There was nothing less than a revolution that took place in homes and in relationships when a person made a commitment to Christ. That commitment, to bring about that kind of explosive opposition, had to have been clear-cut, decisive and final. Responding to the Gospel is not something you wander into. It is a choice—a definitive, life-changing, life revolutionizing decision. It is made with the facts in hand and with the consequences in mind. Jesus knew that and so did His disciples. So with that warning, He sent them out to start the church and to start a revolution in the process.

It was during that time, you may remember, that Herodias demanded and succeeded in having John the Baptist beheaded. The disciples heard about it, and they took his body and buried it in a tomb. Then they went and told Jesus what had happened. It reads:

and when Jesus heard of it, he withdrew from where he was.

(Matthew 14:13 TLOCIS)¹

Our Lord, on hearing of the brutal murder of John, “withdrew from where He was”. He had to be alone. Sometimes we, too, must withdraw and meditate and sometimes grieve. The crowds mean well, but at times like that, the crowds don’t help. This was such a time.

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony;
by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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The story of God's life on planet earth continues, now, as the disciples return from their tour of evangelism, only to find the same pushing, shoving throngs they had left when they left Jesus. Wherever He went, people were there. Whenever He spoke, people came. Whenever He taught, people learned. But even He occasionally needed to call time out. And today's pilgrimage in the footsteps of Jesus begins with such a time.

Our Scriptures are found in ¹Matthew 14, ²Mark 6, ³Luke 9, and ⁴John 6 using The Life of Christ in Stereo translation. Our passage begins like this:

³Now the apostles on returning ²gathered together with Jesus, and reported to him all the things they had done and taught. Then said he to them, "Come away by yourselves to a wilderness place and *rest* for a little while." For there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure time even to eat. ³And he took them and withdrew privately ²in the boat ⁴to the other side of the sea of Galilee (or Sea of Tiberias) ³to a wilderness spot belonging to a city called Bethsaida.

(¹Matthew 14; ²Mark 6; ³Luke 9; ⁴John 6 TLOCIS)

The troops were anxious to report to their commander. They wanted to tell Him everything that had happened. Tenderly, He listened. Attentively, He listened. Compassionately, He listened. Then He did what any good leader would do. He commanded them to come apart before they came apart. They were emotionally drained, spiritually stretched and physically worn. They were, at this moment, just on the other side of victory, prime candidates for satanic attacks. Jesus knew that, so He lovingly invited them to His place in the country for a day or so of "R and R". I say "His place in the country," a little with tongue-in-cheek, because He had no place to lay His head, let alone a country estate. But, alas, all that belonged to the Father was His, and all belonged to the Father. So Jesus took them quietly (it may possibly have been late at night), boarded a boat and headed for the other side of the Sea of Galilee to the village of Bethsaida, where He had planned to take them nearby for some quality time alone.

It appeared to be His objective to avoid the mobs that had been intruding with clock-like regularity on His every minute, so He could give those He loved a chance to unwind and recharge their spiritual batteries. There were so many coming and going, Scripture reads, "they had no leisure time even to eat." I mean, there wasn't even enough of a break between counselling calls

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and preaching engagements to run to McDonald's for a "Big Mac"! Jesus knew that such a horrid pace can be endured for a season, but not indefinitely, so He lovingly prepared a short vacation to take His men away from the mob scene that awaited them when they returned. But things don't always work out the way we plan, do they? Have you ever planned a break from the routine, only to have a totally unexpected interruption destroy your seemingly perfect schedule?

Well, that's what happened to the Master. Listen, as the Scripture continues:

But the crowds learned of it and ²saw them leaving, and many recognized him; and together on foot they hurried that direction from all the towns. ³They followed him ⁴because of seeing the miraculous signs which he wrought on those who were sick. ²They even arrived there before them, and came together toward him; so when Jesus came ashore, he beheld a great throng. But he was moved with compassion toward them, as they were like sheep that had no shepherd. ³And he welcomed them, ²and began to teach them many things; ³and he talked to them about the Kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing.

(¹Matthew 14; ²Mark 6; ³Luke 9; ⁴John 6 TLOCIS)

Can't you just picture it in your mind? Here's King Jesus, His arms around His precious, select few, who had just returned from the spiritual wars, as He's leading them into a boat to head across the Sea of Galilee for a day or two of rest and recuperation. "But the crowds learned of it...and saw them leaving."

Do you ever feel your life has lost its sense of privacy? Do you ever feel your ministry has invaded the sanctuary of your inner world and robbed you of your freedom to be alone? Jesus understands. Oh, how Jesus understands. He's been there. Like a newly-formed Jerusalem Secret Service, the crowds that followed Jesus had an underground ear to His every move. And, lo, someone saw them leave and reported it to the masses. Like a giant parade, they swarmed in His direction. And the farther they went, the larger the crowd; like a huge snowball, they multiplied as they moved toward the Master.

I don't know how they did it, but they arrived at Bethsaida before Jesus did. When Jesus and His disciples disembarked, it says, "they came together toward Him...so when Jesus came ashore, He beheld a great throng."

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It looked like a giant political rally, only the star of the show hadn't planned to have one. I have no doubt what Peter was doing. He was probably murmuring. He was, no doubt, saying, "Lord, get rid of them...we can't have a retreat with half of Israel hanging around. Tell them this is private time with your team and send them home. I mean, after all, Lord, we came to rest, didn't we? We came for peace and quiet, didn't we?"

I know what I would have done. I've been there. I decide to spend a quiet evening at home resting, and the phone rings. No, I don't jump up, grab the phone, and say, "Wow, I hope it's somebody I can minister to; I didn't need the rest anyway!" No, I don't say that. I've set aside time to withdraw from contacts with the real world and even unplugged the phone, and the doorbell goes, "Ding..." No, I don't always rush to the door, praising God and praying for an opportunity to meet needs. I should, but so often, my heart sinks instead. "Aw, gimme a break, Lord," I moan. "Can't I even have a few, minutes to myself? Don't you know what it's like, Lord?" "Yes, my child," He whispers, "I know what it's like."

He did intend to retreat from the crowds and He did. But while He was speaking and as He went... you know the story... "behold a great throng." Now, to me, the interesting thing is not that Jesus stopped to minister to the multitudes at the expense of His rest and relaxation. That does not surprise me. Somehow, I expect that. What interests me is why He did it. I would have done it, if I had, either out of guilt or duty. Jesus did it out of an abundance of love. Look at what it says:

But he was moved with compassion toward them, as sheep
having no shepherd. (Mark 6:34 TLOCIS)

The heart of God so broke over the lack of direction and purpose and hope of that throng, that He couldn't do anything else but minister to them. He was moved with compassion. That means that the God of Eternity who framed the worlds, stopped to weep over the hopelessness of these men. And once He stopped to weep, He stopped to do something about it. Some of us are willing to weep in the prayer closets, but unwilling to get involved in the marketplace, especially at the expense of our own plans. Jesus had no plans too important for needy people to interrupt. None.

Here's what He did.

1- He welcomed them. He made them feel wanted. Have you ever had someone intrude on your precious time and so you gave in

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and let them bother you, but let them know all the while by the look on your face that you wish they'd leave? Boy, I have. You can, you know, ask people into your home, but never admit them into your heart. You can minister to them and never let them forget they're intruders, at least I can. And I hate myself when I do. And I hate it when others do it to me. I can't stand it when people try to minister to me while their mind is racing to their next appointment. And yet I do it all the time. Jesus didn't. He welcomed them. He made them feel loved. He had a way of taking a crowd of a thousand and making each one feel as though they were the only one around. That's God at work in man. That's how we can tell if He is at work in us, as well.

2- He began to teach them many things. He didn't just make them feel loved. That simply is not enough. Once they knew He loved them, He began to teach them why He loved them. He began to teach them many things. That means it wasn't an abbreviated mini-study to get rid of them. He taught and He taught and He taught and He taught. Why? Because He looked out on that mob and saw, not people who were invading His privacy, but sheep who had no shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd are in grave danger. They don't know where they're going. They don't know danger when they see it. They have no one to protect them, no one to lead them, no one to guide them. The Master didn't teach on the run. He decided to "set a spell" and share His heart.

3- He talked to them about the Kingdom of God. He didn't just give them facts. He talked to them, that is, He spoke of everyday reality and how a Living relationship with God could change their lives. That made the facts relevant. Otherwise, they would have simply been to a doctrinal seminar and gone away more respectable. Now they had been face to face with God, and they went away more accountable.

4- He healed those who had need of healing. Some could not respond spiritually because they were physically hurting and needed a revelation from God as to who He was. So, once He taught them, those who really needed healing were healed. Jesus put feet to His doctrine. He did what He claimed He could do, and all of this for a group of intruders who had forced themselves into His life at a time when He wanted to be alone with His own. And all because His heart broke when He realized how much they needed what He had. But of course, the story doesn't end there.

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Now the practical problems that accompany all day teaching seminars begin to surface. And once again, Jesus gives us an illustration of how God allows seemingly impossible situations to arise so He will be free to demonstrate who He is. Listen:

²Now when the day was far spent, ⁴Jesus went up on the mountain and there He sat with His disciples. And the Passover, the Jewish feast, was at hand. So when Jesus raised his eyes and saw a great multitude approaching him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy loaves of bread, so that these people might eat?" (But this he said to test him, for he himself knew what He would do.) Philip answered him, "*Two hundred denaries' worth of loaves* would not be enough for them to receive just a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother said to him, "Here is a young lad who has five barley loaves and two small fish; but what are these among *so many?*"

(¹Matthew 14; ²Mark 6; ³Luke 9; ⁴John 6 TLOCIS)

As if God hadn't been bothered enough, the seminar was over, and here came another gang of hangers-on, looking helplessly lost and hopelessly hungry. The tickets hadn't said, "Lunch Included." In fact, the tickets didn't even say, "Y'all come". They were there because they were sheep wandering about the hillside in search of a Shepherd, and they had found one. No, they had found the Shepherd, the one who lays down His life for His sheep.

It says, "the day was far spent." Jesus may have taught all night and all day as well. It was Passover time, and Jesus was tired, so He and His disciples withdrew a bit and sat down on a big rock to assess the situation. So far, no retreat. So far, no rest. So far, no quiet. So far, nothing but pushing, shoving people searching for something. And they found what they were searching for...the Living God!

Jesus looks up. Look what's coming. More people. Hungry, searching people. Jesus turns to Philip and asks Philip a question, not because He didn't know the answer, but because He wanted to know if Philip knew the answer. There was a temporal answer, and there was a spiritual answer. There always is. He wanted to see which Philip would choose. So He decided to test Philip by admitting a need, to see which course Phil would take to solve the problem. Phil handled it about the way most of us would have.

Jesus said, "How are we going to feed all these people, Phil? Do we go Krogering? Do we wait for double coupon day and pool our

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resources? What do we do?” Philip responded, “Lord, unless you hit oil today, (that was before oil prices fell), we couldn’t buy enough bread to feed this mob. Even day-old stuff costs more than that.” (That’s a modern translation, but just about what he said.) I’d give Philip about a D+ on the test. He didn’t panic, but that’s about all you can say for him. Enter Andrew. Andrew gets about a C+. He still doesn’t have the faith to believe, but at least he recognizes the natural material God could use to do something supernatural. He says, “Lord, here’s a kid with a box lunch. He’s got five barley loaves and two little bitty fish.” I don’t know whether he was bordering on faith or being sarcastic. But once he had pointed to the lad’s insufficiency, instead of pointing to God’s sufficiency, he gives in to the bleakness of the hour. “What are these among so many?” he moans. “What are these among so many?”

That question was one that has echoed down through the ages and made an indelible impression on the lives of men. It has been duplicated again and again by faithless men and women as they stood in the presence of a Sovereign God and wondered how He could deal with the crisis at hand with no more obvious materials than He had to work with.

Christians have stood on the threshold of spiritual defeat and prayed in that hour for a miracle of grace to see them through their hour of need. Those about them saw no hope. “I have my God, and I have His Word,” the hurting were heard to say. “But what is that amidst a trial so great?” they cry. What good will the fiber of their faith do them when there is no hope at all? Christians have stood and stared impossible odds in the face when God seemed to be leading them in a certain direction, yet the circumstances indicated there was no way. No way for those funds to come. No way for that person to change. No way for such a project as that to be done by a group so small as this. No way. They look at the challenge, and they look at the absence of the obvious and cry, “What are these among so many?” What man has such a hard time understanding is that not until the odds are beyond man’s comprehension, does God have a chance to truly glorify Himself. So long as man with God’s help can get the job done, the job just might as well be done by man. Not until there is no other way, can Jesus step in and do the impossible to the Glory of the Father.

Jesus had allowed such an impossible situation to arise. He let an army of hungry people surround Him, and then He turned to His trusted aides and asked them what they thought He should do.

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He often does that. He often gives us just enough rope to see what we will do with it. So He did with Philip. Andrew interrupts, not with a plea of faith, but with a ridiculous offer that would do man, apart from God, no good at all. Now the only thing man could do would be to let God do what He wanted to do. By now the disciples had formed a committee to analyze the situation, and they come to the kind of decision committees always come to. Let's hear their report:

Then came the twelve and they said to Him, ¹"the place ³here ¹is a wilderness, and the hour already late; ³send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and countryside round about, and lodge, ¹and buy themselves food, ²for they have nothing to eat." But He answered them, ¹"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

²And they said to Him, "Shall we go and buy two hundred denaries' worth of loaves, and give them to them to eat?" But He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And on finding out, they said ¹to Him, "We have here just five loaves and two fish, ³unless indeed we go and buy food for all this throng!" But He said, "Bring them here to me!"

(¹Matthew 14; ²Mark 6; ³Luke 9; ⁴John 6 TLOCIS)

Jesus said, "Bring what you have to me." The question often arises, "Why does God in Scripture so often seem to take what man has and multiply it, rather than just drop out of heaven what man needs?" "Why multiply five loaves and two fish, rather than just raise up T-Bones out of the desert? Why?"

I think it's because God is not after our learning to turn Him into a genie who produces miracles at the drop of a hat for our enjoyment. God is interested in commitment. He is interested in our giving what we have to Him so that once it is in His hands, He can multiply it, and then not only, is He glorified because of what He has done, but also because of who and what He has done it with. Jesus didn't say, "No problem, gang, I'll just whip up a little barbecue out of some sand and make us a chuck-wagon supper." No, Jesus looked lovingly into the eyes of the disciples who had just informed Him that the only way out of the problem was to do it the world's way. They would have to float a loan at the Bethsaida National Bank, find the nearest Pizza Hut with a huge takeout counter, and bag up the biggest bunch of goodies ever concocted that side of Galilee. Jesus said "Wait a minute. What do you have?" They shuffled their feet embarrassingly. "Just five loaves and two fish, Lord," they apologized; "not enough to feed us, let alone them."

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His haunting words echo through the annals of time. “Bring them to me.” They did and the rest is history. Five thousand men, not counting women and children, lined up on that grassy hillside, and Jesus held up those five loaves and those two fish where everyone could see what God had to work with, and He blessed them. He praised God, and He distributed only what God produced out of what they had. Not only were they all filled, but they filled twelve baskets with what was left over.

Do you see what God is saying? He is painting a beautiful picture of what a creative God does with what He has to work with. The less He has to work with, the more He can do, because the less we can do to share His glory. Some of you spend the better part of your days bemoaning the fact that God can’t possibly use you. You’re not educated enough or talented enough or visible enough, or attractive enough. Like that enlistment poster of old, God points His finger lovingly at you and says, “I want you!” And you answer, “Lord, not me! What am I among such greats? Look at my few talents. What are they among so many?”

Today Jesus is reaching out to you, Beloved, and whispering simply, “Bring them to me.” He doesn’t need your talents. So the fewer you have, the more He can take you and bless you and break you and multiply you, to use you to feed a hungry world. He doesn’t need your talents. He wants your heart. Some of you, whom the world would count as “least likely to succeed,” are the best prospects God has to change the world.

You are all God needs. The less you have, the more He needs you. You’re His kind of man. You’re His kind of woman. You’re the raw material out of which spiritual greatness is made. Why not stop right now, and once and for all place the loaves and the fish that represent your life in the hands of a sovereign God. The world won’t understand. The world will be back at the grocery store looking for a special on bread. Let ’em look. You just take what little you have, place it in the hands of the God of multiplication, and watch a miracle unfold before your eyes. The world will look at you in amazement and ask as the disciples did, “What are these?”

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WHAT ARE THESE?

What are these? They sneered and chuckled.
Just a paltry pail of food,
Five little loaves and a pair of fish
Among all these 'twill do no good.

And they were right, 't'was not enough
To start to feed that hungry throng.
“What are these among so many?”
Soon became the world’s sad song.

They were yet to see the difference;
Finite eyes can’t understand
What a meager nothing turns to
When it’s placed in Jesus’ hand.

“Father, take and bless I pray thee
What this little lad has brought,
And may countless millions praise thee
From this lesson thou hast taught”

Now for untold generations
Men and women have learned to sing,
“What am I among so many?”
In God’s hands, I’m everything!

For Further Application

1- Do research in the Scriptures for other times God took what man had and multiplied it to glorify Himself. Why did God so often choose those who were weaker or had less as His vessels? Can you substantiate that in Scripture?

2- Find other passages where Jesus was planning to rest, but was interrupted by people with needs. How did He handle it? What pattern can you form from your own life about time apart from the priorities Jesus set? What pattern about handling interruptions?

3- What do you think the word “welcome” means? What can you learn about the attitude Jesus had toward even those who intruded on His privacy?

4- Rewrite the story of the loaves and fish, using a modern day scenario; if possible, one from personal experience.

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