

In our study of the Gospel of Matthew, we left off last week in chapter 14 with the death of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod. After John's disciples buried his headless body, they told Jesus what happened. Remember John was Jesus' cousin, and he played an important role in Jesus's life. Jesus called John the greatest prophet to ever live. These two men had a deep bond. So how do you think Jesus resounded to the news of John's death?

Matthew says, *"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place"* (v. 13a). We can only imagine what was going on in Jesus' mind. Perhaps he needed to get away and sort things out. Also, being so closely identified with John, he may have sensed he too was in danger. Knowing his time had not yet come; he withdrew, hoping to lay low. We know this took place during Passover, and just one year later Jesus would endure a similar fate as John.

But Jesus had something else in mind besides staying out of trouble. He also sensed the need to invest more energy into preparing the Twelve for his departure. How would these men fare when he was gone? If you're a parent imagine having just one year left with your kids. You'd want to spend that year pouring into them, making sure they're equipped to carry on without you. This is the focus in the next two stories we are looking at today—preparing the disciples for the challenges ahead. And one of the things we'll see is these guys needed a lot of help. They were very much a work in progress.

Next we will look at two stories where Jesus intentionally wants to teach his disciples the most crucial thing they'd need in their journey ahead. What these men would need more than anything is **faith**. And faith isn't something you just either have or don't have. Occasionally, I hear people say, "I wish I could have your faith," as if faith is something you're born with. But it's not that way. It doesn't come automatically to us. Faith is something that must be developed. Faith is learned. It has to be practiced. Think of faith like a muscle. For a muscle to grow, to develop, to become stronger, it must be stretched; it has to be fatigued, even torn down, pressed to the limit. Faith is the same way.

Jesus is all about developing **our** faith just as he did with his disciples. I had a faith-stretching experience just this past week. I flew to Truckee on a small plane. We're talking eight people. I knew I was in trouble when I could reach out and touch the pilot from my seat. To make matters worse, the co-pilot was a young adult who looked younger than my own children. When she called herself the Captain, I thought seriously about de-boarding. And

then about halfway through the flight we hit such turbulence my head hit the ceiling of the plane. I like planes where my head can't hit the ceiling. My friend, who has taken the same flight hundreds of times, said that was only the second time that's ever happened. That made me feel so much better! But needless to say, we landed safely, and even though my stomach was in my head, my faith was stronger!

So let's look at these two stories about how the disciple's faith was stretched and developed.

### **The Feeding of the 5,000**

The first story begins as Jesus and his disciples withdraw.

**When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:13–14)**

Jesus and his disciples jump in a boat and head for a deserted place across the lake to be alone. But somehow the crowd knew where they were going and some of them made the trek along the edge of the lake to where their boat would land. Others from lakeshore towns heard the news and joined them. When Jesus and his crew arrived there a massive crowd greeted them. You can imagine how the disciples felt. They were looking forward to some downtime with Jesus, but instead they get this: more needy people, more work, more stress.

But what they saw as an intrusion, Jesus saw as an opportunity. He had compassion on them and begins to heal the sick. That word *compassion* is a strong word describing a gut level reaction to need. Don't you love this about Jesus? He's never looking at his watch; never aggravated when his plans are interrupted. He's always available; always in the moment.

But this goes on late into the afternoon, and the disciples are getting worried about dinner. So they decide to tell Jesus what to do next. Verse 15 says.

**As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."**

Sounds like a good plan. Later Matthew tells us there were 5,000 men in that crowd, so if you add women and children we're talking over 10,000 people. And they have to eat, right? So maybe they can find some food in the nearby villages. Honestly, though, I think the disciples were the ones who were hungry. I

do that all the time. “You poor folks must be hungry?” But the reality is, I’m hungry!

But Jesus sees another possibility here. The passage continues:

**Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” (verse 16)**

I can just see Thomas rolling his eyes. Jesus was always saying things like this; always challenging their assessment of situations.

So they give it to him straight.

**“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. (verse 17)**

Notice they start with a negative—*“we have here only...”* Hear the sarcasm in their voice. By the way, the loaves were what we call a bun. Five little buns with two fish would make up a nice dinner for one. In John’s gospel we learn this was a little boy’s lunch and these were barely loaves, which was the food of the poor. So we’re not talking about much here, just a poor boy’s lunch.

For the disciples, this wasn’t much at all, but for Jesus it was the basis for his action.

**“Bring them here to me,” he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (verses 18–21)**

Jesus takes over. He directs the people to sit on the grass—it’s time to eat. Then he looks up to heaven, gives thanks, breaks the bread and starts passing it to the disciples, who pass it on to the people. And it just keeps coming until everyone ate and there were twelve full baskets left over, so each disciple gets his own basket. It says *“they all ate and were satisfied.”* I can just imagine the disciples munching away in their own group, joyful and bewildered over what just happened.

## **Jesus Walks on the Water**

So that’s the end of that story...or is it? Notice the next word in v. 22 is *immediately*. It says

**Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. (verse 22)**

Jesus is like, “C’mon guys get in the boat. You gotta get outta here, now!” There’s urgency in this. Matthew doesn’t really tell us why, but John does in his Gospel. He says Jesus withdrew because the people *“intended to come and make him king by force”* (John 6:15). So Jesus was concerned his own disciples would be swayed by the grassroots revolutionary movement to make him King, so he gets them outta there, quick!

But he’s not going with them. Look what happens.

**After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. (verse 23a)**

As we saw, Jesus had tried to get away earlier when he withdrew from the crowds. Now he’s intentional about making it happen. What did he pray about out there? What was on his heart? I believe he was still processing John’s death. Perhaps he began to see that in light of his own impending death. The people wanted to make him King, and he **was** a King, and there’s temptation in that. But deep down he knew there could be no crown without the cross, and he needed to process that in the presence of his Father.

He prayed long into the night. Meanwhile, the disciples are having a hard go at crossing the lake.

**Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. (verses 23b–24)**

These guys were well into their journey, but it wasn’t going so well. They faced a strong headwind and a rising sea. They were getting nowhere. They were exhausted. By the way, the Jewish people didn’t like the sea. It wasn’t a fun place to them; it was a dark and chaotic place.

That’s when another miracle took place.

**Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear.**

**But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” (verses 25–27)**

That little phrase *“shortly before dawn”* means it was between three and six o’clock in the morning—the darkest part of the night. Jesus calmly strode across the lake and his disciples were frightened, thinking he’s a ghost. There was a popular superstition that if you saw a spirit at night you were finished. They’re thinking, “This is it, we’re done for!”

But Jesus spoke to them, *“Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”* Those words, *“It is I”* are very important. I’ll talk about that in a moment. But, hearing that, Peter had an idea.

**“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”**

**“Come,” he said.**

**Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!”**

**Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (verse 28–31)**

Notice getting out of the boat was Peter’s idea. Not that it was a bad idea, but it this wasn’t initiated by Jesus. But Peter believes if his Lord can walk on water, so can he. And Jesus invites him to come. So Peter gets out of the boat and begins to walk. We don’t know how far he got. He might have gone fifty yards or five feet but when his attention turned from Jesus to the wind and the waves, he became afraid and started to sink. It’s kinda funny that Peter’s name means rock, because he’s sinking like a rock would!

But then he does something smart. He cries out, *“Lord, save me!”* and the Lord reaches out, pulls him up and says, *“You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”*

Next thing you know, they're safe in the boat, the wind dies down, and I'm sure they sat in stunned silence.

**Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (verse 33)**

This is the first time, according to Matthew, that they worshipped Jesus, and the first time they confessed him to be God's Son.

So let's put these two stories together. Taken side by side, what do they teach us about how Jesus develops our faith?

### **Focus on the Object of Our Faith**

The first and foremost thing to see from these two stories is our faith can only grow as we get to know the object of our faith better. Make no mistake; these two stories reveal a profound Christology. We don't place our faith in faith. It's about Jesus. It's not about having confidence in ourselves, but confidence in Christ. So what do these stories teach us about our Lord? Why is he worthy of our faith? Notice both his humanity and his divinity.

In his humanity, we see his need for solitude and prayer. Think about it. Plan A was to get away with his disciples in a boat. That didn't work. So he goes to Plan B: “You guys get into the boat. I'll see you on the other side.” Then he spent the next several hours alone in prayer. He was modeling a life of dependence on the Father. Even though he's God's Son, he's human and needs to cast all his cares on him. Now if he needed to do that, don't we need it even more? Are we as intentional as he was about this? Do we regularly withdraw to be alone with the Father? I'm not talking about taking a vacation. Our vacations often just wear us out. Sometimes even the church wears us out. Someone wrote, “Mary had a little lamb, 'Twas given her to keep. But then she joined the local church, and died for lack of sleep.” The Son of God understood the importance of withdrawal to be alone with his Father, and so must we.

But we also see his compassion. When his plan to withdraw from the crowd was interrupted, he was deeply moved by the needs around him and he went to work to meet them. How different he is from the King we heard about earlier—King Herod. Herod threw a party in a palace for himself on his birthday; Jesus threw a party in the wilderness for the hungry crowd. Herod threw a party for the important people of his world; Jesus threw a party for the poor. Herod was moved by a stripper's plea to hand over the head of John on a platter; Jesus was moved by human suffering. He saw their need and he fed them, he healed them. Do you know him as the compassionate one? He understands you like no one else. Like the old hymn goes, “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

That was his humanity; how about his divinity? In the first story we're reminded of Moses in the wilderness, and how God

provided manna from heaven for the Israelites. Here, Jesus was the new Moses who provided for his people. On a deeper level, he was the bread of life that came down from heaven. Just like he took that bread, broke it, blessed it, and gave it away, so he himself would be taken, broken, blessed and given to us.

But he's not only the bread of life, when Jesus said, *“It is I,”* he's using the name God gave Moses. When Moses asked his name, God said, “Tell them ‘I AM’ sent you.” And that “I AM” went on to part the sea. Here he doesn't part it, but he walks on it. Job 9:8 says, *“He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea.”* He's the One who treads on the waves of the sea! There's nothing in your life he isn't able to handle.

Don't put your faith in faith. Put your faith in him! And don't just get to know about him; get to know him! But how does that happen? How do we get to know him? How is our faith in him developed?

### **He Puts Us in Situations Where We're in Over Our Head**

In both stories we see the answer. He puts his disciples in situations where they were in over their heads; where they do **not** have what it takes to meet the challenge in front of them. How do you feed over 10,000 hungry people with just five little buns and two measly perch? Yet Jesus says, *“YOU give them something to eat.”* An impossible command to obey apart from his provision.

In the second story you see the same thing. They were in a storm. The winds were in their face; they'll never get to the other side on their own. Yet we know Jesus had sent them on this little boat ride. He put them in that situation for a purpose—to teach them they didn't have what it takes, but he does. You can be entirely in the will of God, and yet struggling against the wind, getting nowhere.

I told you this before, but every time I walk up the ballpark to do a chapel or Bible study for the Giants I feel like this. I'm scared to death. I hear a voice in my head saying, “You're too old to relate to them. And what do you know about being a professional baseball player? And you're an introvert. You don't do well in new situations.” On and on it goes. So I get there early because I have to take a lap around the ballpark to get my head straight. I hear **him** say to me, “That's right. You don't have what it takes, but I do.” You've heard the saying, “God will never give you more than you can handle.” That's baloney! He'll often give you more than you can handle. But he won't give you more than **he** can handle. And he's there for you. Better yet, he lives in you! If you're in a situation where you don't have it takes, that's good, and put your trust in him!

### **He Uses What We Offer to Him to Meet Needs of Others**

You see, this is another part of faith development. He just wants you to offer up what you are and what you have, and he'll multiply that to meet the needs of others. What's a deficit to us

becomes a surplus in his hands. *“Lord, we have only...”* But for Jesus that’s all he needed. He says to us, *“Bring them here to me.”*

Several years ago, Barry Bonds was playing in the All-Star game. He came to bat, fouled off a pitch and broke his bat. He then walked to the stands and gave his broken bat to a little boy as a souvenir. The boy was amazed. Now use your imagination for a moment. Imagine the boy had his own toy bat with him. You know, one of those little bats you buy in the souvenir shop. And what if he gave Barry that little bat, and what if Barry walked back to the plate and used that bat to hit a home run? I’d say that would have been even more amazing—using what that boy offered to him to hit a home run.

Jesus Christ hit a home run out there in the wilderness that evening, but the greater miracle is he used the disciples’ meager supplies to do it. He didn’t have to do it that way. He could have just snapped his fingers and everyone would have had a full meal right in front of them. But he uses us, and he uses what we have to meet the needs of others. Take what you have, insufficient as it may seem, and put it into his hands. You might have just a small seed of faith, a head full of doubts, a past full of sin, and a heart that’s been broken too many times, but Jesus will take it, bless it, break it, and give to the world. You just have to keep coming back to him, and he’ll never run out of supply.

### **He Invites Us to Take Risky Steps of Faith**

And sometimes that involves taking a risky step of faith. That’s what Peter did. When Jesus says, “Come,” Peter climbs out. That’s what faith looks like.

There are three essential elements of faith seen in three Latin words: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*:

- *Notitia* refers to faith’s content. Faith’s content is all about understanding the gospel and who Jesus is.
- *Assensus* means agreement, assenting to the gospel. It’s like saying, I understand and believe it. *Notitia* and *assensus* are important aspects of faith, but there’s one more aspect—*fiducia*.
- *Fiducia* means actually trusting in Jesus; putting your full weight on him. That’s what Peter did here. He believed that figure walking on the water was Jesus, but he needed to get out of the boat, believing Jesus would take care of him, to have real faith. And it worked. He stepped out and walked on water.

We don’t know how far he got, but before long he got distracted and when he did, he began to sink. But Peter’s faith didn’t fail completely. Two things tip me off to that. First, when he did

begin to sink, he still cried out, *“Lord, save me!”* That’s faith too! He could have tried to get back into the boat on his own, but he didn’t. Maybe Peter was nearer to the Lord when he was sinking than when walking on the water. It was when Peter was in deep trouble that he was driven in desperation to Jesus and closest to him. Secondly, when Jesus rebukes him he doesn’t say he had no faith, but just *“little faith.”* Well, little faith is better than no faith. Jesus calls it *“doubt.”* Doubt isn’t no faith all. Doubt is an attack on faith. Literally, the word doubt means to be of two minds.

Do you know what I love about this? God’s grace. Peter is just like we are—we get distracted, we take our eyes off Jesus, we have little faith mixed with doubt, we begin to sink, we cry out. But this is a necessary process for us. This is how faith is developed—not in the calm waters, but in the storm, not even when we’re walking on water, but when we’re sinking. You see, in the end, our security is not found in our perfect faith, but his perfect faithfulness.

### **He Satisfies Us and Brings Us to a Deeper Level of Worship**

And, in the end, that’s what both of these stories emphasize. Imagine two scenes.

Scene #1—Twelve disciples sitting on the grass, the sun beginning to set, each with their own basket of bread. *“And they all ate and were satisfied.”* I don’t think that satisfaction was all about a full belly, but a satisfaction of the soul. “Did you see what just happened? Can you believe it? And he used us to do that! And, look, we’re sitting here with twelve baskets, filled with bread from heaven. And oh my, it’s so good.”

Scene #2—Peter and Jesus step into the boat. Jesus calms the storm. *“Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”* That same soul satisfaction now turns to worship. They see him as they’ve never seen him before—*“You are the Son of God!”* Direct address—not talking about him but to him. Maybe even flat on their faces—worshipping.

The most crucial thing you’ll need in your journey ahead is **faith**. And faith isn’t something you just either have or don’t have. Faith is something that needs to be developed. And here’s the good news: He’s committed to doing that in your life.

- He’ll put you in situations where you’re in over your head.
- He’ll ask you to offer up what you have to him, even though it seems so insufficient.
- He’ll invite you to take risky steps of faith.
- And he’ll satisfy you and bring you to a deeper level of worship.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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