

The grace, mercy, and peace of Christ Jesus rest upon each and every one of you this day.

“And Jesus directed the crowd to sit down, and He took the loaves and gave thanks and broke them and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he took the fish and blessed them and said these also should be set before the people. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets in full. And there were about four thousand people.” Even the youngest of Christians get a profound sense of *déjà vu* when hearing these words. We’ve heard this story before, haven’t we? Aside from some statistical figures being different, the story is basically the same, only in some versions Jesus feeds five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, with twelve baskets left over, while in this version, however, we get Jesus feeding four thousand people with seven loaves and a few small fish, with seven baskets of food being left over after the miraculous feast.

Because it’s just a statistical difference, many people—Christians with the best intentions included—have often chalked these numerical differences up to simple human error or reckoning. These stories are often thought of as referring to one single miraculous event, the only real differences arising in the guys who saw and related the events. Matthew’s and Luke’s estimates and accounting differed from Mark’s. Others have seized upon the statistical differences between the two accounts, claiming that this is clear proof that the Scriptures are not God’s inerrant Word, and instead are only narratives put forth from flawed men.

Here’s the thing: These are two different events, not just two versions of the same event. Jesus Himself says so just a few verses after this miraculous feeding in Mark 8 (the feeding of 5,000 recorded

for us in Mark 6). After this later feeding of 4,000 takes place, the disciples and Jesus get into their boat and start for the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Unfortunately, in their haste to leave, the disciples forgot to pack their own food. Jesus was trying to teach them about being on guard against the false righteousness and sinful leaven of the Pharisees, and all the disciples could do was murmur amongst themselves that they didn't have any bread to eat except one tiny loaf, which would not feed a boatload of hungry men.

You can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus' voice as He cuts short His discussion to tend to the rude and selfish interruption of grumbling bellies. “Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up? And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full did you take up then? Do you not yet understand?”

And that's just it: They didn't understand. In fact, the feeding of the four thousand was proof that they really didn't understand who Jesus was and what He was all about. They talked a good game about God and His mercy and His salvation, but they really didn't understand what this meant. The many differences between the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 make this clear.

First off, consider the fact that the feeding of the 5,000 took place in Jewish territory, up around Galilee and Nazareth. When it grew late in the day, and all the locals who had gone out to hear Jesus were facing a long walk home with no supper, it was the disciples who went to Jesus and urged Him to do something. “These people have no food, and it's getting late. Do something Jesus!” These guys cared about their own. It only makes sense, right? The 5,000-plus people who came

out to hear Jesus were the friends and relatives of the disciples—fellow local Jews. They had compassion on their own.

However, in the feeding of the 4,000, the setting and circumstances are very different. If you follow Scripture, it makes it clear that immediately after the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 6, the disciples had gotten in their boat and crossed over into Gentile territory; the wilderness region of Tyre, Sidon, Gennesaret, and the Decapolis (Jesus walked on water later that night to meet up with the boys on the way to the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee). The 4,000 hungry individuals on that side of the lake were “outsiders.” They were unclean Gentiles; people like the bleeding Syro-Phoenician woman or the pig herders in Gennesaret or the formerly demon-possessed man in the graveyard, or any of the non-Jewish sick and suffering. Consequently, the disciples had no real emotional ties to these people.

This is precisely why Jesus is the one who now takes the initiative, telling the disciples very bluntly that He has compassion on these people, and He is not going to send them away with nothing to eat. Such a thing is not even on their radar, and the disciples prove that by responding in total ignorance. “How can one feed these people with bread here in this desolate place?” It’s like the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 had no effect on them. They didn’t get it. They saw that miraculous feeding as something only pertaining to God’s providence and care for His Israelite people. You see, the disciples had a different set of rules and criteria for different people and different circumstances. God took care of good Jewish people in this miraculous way, but the Gentiles were on their own.

This is what the disciples didn’t understand and needed to be taught. God dealt with all people the same exact way. His compassion was for all people, no one greater or more esteemed or more deserving

than anyone else. Scripture tells us again and again and again how all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All—everyone, regardless of age, intellect, ethnicity, tax-bracket, gender, or any other way in which we make distinction—everyone is a sinner who deserves nothing but present and eternal wrath and punishment. And sin is sin. It is absolute. No particular sin is more deserving of death than another. Along the same lines, if it’s a sin when someone we don’t like does it, then it’s also a sin when someone we love and care for does it. If it’s a sin when someone else does it, then it’s also a sin when we do it. But...God so loved everyone—EVERYONE—that He sent His only-begotten Son to atone for the death sentence of sin; to pay the wage in full the ransom payment of His own life-blood and perfect righteousness.

Think about that for a moment. You want to talk about fair?! God does the most unfair thing there is—He puts all our sin on the sinless One, and then turns around and bestows all His perfect righteousness upon us. God made He who was without sin to be our sin in order that we might have life—His life—and have it in heavenly, eternal abundance. Jesus Christ—Almighty God Himself—took on our flesh in order to make the full and complete ransom payment that freed us from the bonds of sin, death, and the devil. Because of Him (and Him alone), we are redeemed, and that “we” includes everyone. Christ died for all! More than that, Christ lives, and He lives for all. He lives for us today. His compassion for all people has not changed or lessened after all these years (or after all our sins). He continues to love us with a love that is unchanging and inexhaustible and incomprehensible; a love so deep and so unfathomable that He continues to come to us and call us to simply sit and receive as He deigns to feed us with His miraculous, life-giving, life-saving means of

grace; the very Bread of Life Himself feeding us and nourishing us with His Word and His sacraments.

Folks: It's that simple. My only prayer is that you get it. I pray that this abundance of God's grace and mercy means something to you, ever and always, in good times and in bad, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. I pray that you continue to come out and be gathered and fed and nourished by your Lord and Savior in this place; this little oasis of life in the midst of this dark and deadly desert wilderness; in the midst of this fallen and sinful world in which we are but pilgrims. My fellow redeemed: While we bear faithfully bear our crosses on this earthly pilgrimage, our Lord still provides. Here is life—His life—and here it is in over-flowing abundance, for you and for all—grace upon grace. “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” May this confession of faith be your confession of faith, now and into all eternity.

AMEN