

Grace Before Greatness

Mark 6:32-56

Introduction

Around the time of World War I, there was a young black girl who lived in the poverty section of Philadelphia. She had a lovely voice. In fact, the people in her church decided to create a fund, which they called, "The Fund for Marian Anderson's Future". They raised 126 pennies, nickels, and dimes and then, planned a way for her to begin voice lessons.

When Marian was eighteen years old, they arranged an audition with a very famous instructor. She had the audition, but failed. Those who believed in her, arranged a concert of music in the town hall of New York City. Many people came, but she was not ready for the exposure and the critics tore her up. For almost a year, Marian Anderson lived, or wallowed I guess you could say, in self-pity.

Finally, Marian's mother came to her and said, "Marian, I want you to think about this failure just a little bit, and pray about it a lot."

All of the people in Marian's church were praying for her, as well.

Then, her mother said something that she never forgot. It also struck me as I read it. Her mother said, "Marian, you must learn that grace comes before greatness."

We have a problem on our hands in our study today. The Lord Jesus recognized it, of course, being omniscient. His disciples were filled with thoughts of greatness. They had just returned from their first mission. They had performed tremendous miracles; they had seen people come to follow the kingdom program; they had seen people restored. In fact, they had seen so many tremendous things happen that, I

think, it was going to their heads. As one professor said, "I think they were beginning to believe the press reports."

So Jesus creates a scenario in which two miracles can take place. Turn to Mark, chapter 6, as we continue to study through the Gospel of Mark. Understanding everything that has happened prior to these events, these miracles will come alive.

I believe Jesus wanted these miracles to teach His disciples:

- how to serve without selfishness;
- how to fail without falling.

Jesus, the model of grace, is going to teach His disciples that grace, indeed, comes before greatness.

The Provision of Christ

Let us pick up the story at Mark 6:32.

They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.

Jesus and His disciples were planning to take a short vacation to get away and rest for a few days. However, look at Mark 6:33.

The people saw them going, and many recognized them and ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them.

I gave all of the facts concerning this to a mariner in our church, who does a lot of sailing. I learned from him, that this trip should have taken Jesus and the disciples, with all of the weather conditions permitting, perhaps four or five hours. The people

had nine miles to run, and yet, they outran the disciples.

While we consider the fact that Jesus was taking these men to a retreat, we will learn, in a moment, that the retreat was the four or five hour trip by boat. When they arrive at the shore, they meet a crowd of about 5,000 men and perhaps, as many women and children, as well. There is a possibility, as one commentator stated, that Jesus could have been addressing nearly 15,000 people.

How would you feel if you were on a vacation and were met at your destination, by 15,000 or 20,000 people who wanted the latest report from you. How would you feel if you were the disciples and were ready for a break, but when you get off the boat, you see, coming toward you en masse, about 15,000 people?

Would you feel delighted and think, "Oh boy, another chance to serve Jesus.?" Or, would you be filled with frustration and think, "Oh no, I can't believe it, another sermon.?"

The disciple's overwhelming feeling was, I think, irritation. It will reveal itself in the next few verses.

In our study today, we will contrast two different reactions, two different perspectives, and two different responses. These will reveal the Master of Grace teaching His disciples, and us, how to model grace.

Two Different Reactions

Notice first, the two different reactions that Jesus and the disciples had to this crowd.

1. The first reaction is of compassion by Jesus.

Look at Mark 6:34a.

When Jesus went ashore, He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd; . . .

The word "compassion," as we discussed in our last study, is from the Greek word "splaḡnnon". This means that Jesus was moved with a "gut feeling" of caring.

Notice, in this verse, why Jesus felt compassion for the crowd.

. . . because they were like sheep without a shepherd; . . .

Why is that so bad; why, in fact, is that a problem? Because sheep without a shepherd cannot find their way. Sheep without a shepherd cannot find

pasture and will starve. Sheep without a shepherd cannot find a defense against their predators. Sheep without a shepherd are totally helpless.

What an indictment this is on the religious leaders of that day. Should the people have had shepherds? Absolutely. The Pharisees, the scribes, the Sadducees, the lawyers, and those who knew the Law should have been shepherds. But Jesus Christ saw all of these people coming to Him and said, "They are sheep starving to death. They are sheep without any defense."

What an indictment against the religious leaders of Jesus' day. So, as we are told in the last phrase of Mark 6:34,

. . . and He began to teach them many things.

How wonderful that is. Continue to Mark 6:35.

When it was already quite late, His disciples came to Him and said, "This place is desolate and it is already quite late;

2. Now we will see the second reaction to this crowd, by the disciples, of frustration.

We observed a reaction of compassion by Jesus to this crowd. Now, in Mark 6:36, we see a reaction by the disciples of, I think, frustration. They say, poignantly enough,

send them away . . .

One reaction was compassion and another was frustration or irritation.

Now, we are going to understand that sending this crowd away had to do specifically, with the fact that they had no food. However, I think these words sum up their attitude toward all of these people. In other words, "Lord, it's getting dark. Would you get rid of these people for us, please? Send them away."

Yet, Jesus Christ, as the gospel writer records, points His finger at these men and says, in Mark 6:37,

. . . You give them something to eat! . . .

I could not help, in my study, but to pause a moment and sense perhaps, the finger of God pointing at me. Realize perhaps, as a believer, His finger is pointing to you, as well. We think, "Lord, there are all of these people with needs; these people are hungry and I can't handle it. Send them away."

Have you ever sensed the finger of Jesus Christ pointing to you and saying, "No. I want *you* to meet their need; I want *you* to feed them.?"

Two Different Perspectives

Now notice two different perspectives, not directly from the text, but concluded from the text.

1. First, Jesus saw an illustration, while the disciples saw an interruption.

John records, in chapter 6, that Jesus will feed this crowd of people from five loaves of bread and two fish, and then, He will preach the message that He is the bread of life coming from heaven. This is a tremendous illustration of what He was all about.

Yet, what Jesus saw as an opportunity for an illustration; a sermon in action, the disciples saw as an interruption. Jesus Christ would break the bread in His hands and then, give it to His disciples to give to the multitude.

This is an opportunity and an illustration that you and I have today. We do not create the message; we do not have in our hands, the ability to multiply the bread. We do have the ability to distribute the bread. Jesus Christ is the creator; He is the one who takes the loaves and fish and will, by His supernatural ability, divide it so that everyone can be filled. However, He uses you and me to hand it out.

2. Secondly, Jesus saw an opportunity, while the disciples saw obstacles.

What an opportunity this was to have a sermon in action. Yet I think, the disciples saw, not opportunity, but obstacles. They said, "Lord, it's getting late. We don't have any money. There isn't a bakery nearby. Even if we could come up with eight month's salary, we couldn't buy enough bread to feed this crowd. So tell them to get lost."

I think, ladies and gentlemen, understanding what has gone on before in Mark, chapter 5, that we are seeing disciples who are filled with thoughts of their own importance; their own greatness. Yet, Jesus Christ, the compassionate One, is filled with grace.

Two Different Responses

Now turn to John, chapter 6. Mark, in his story, leaves out what happens next. In John 6, we will see two different responses that are classic.

1. First, the apostle Philip responds with no faith.

Look at John 6:5. Jesus speaks specifically to Philip.

Therefore Jesus, lifting up His eyes and seeing that a large crowd was coming to

Him, said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?"

It is interesting that Philip was from this region; this was his hometown. It is as if Jesus was saying, "Philip, you know where all of the bakeries are. Where can we go to buy bread?"

Notice John 6:6.

This He was saying to test him, for He Himself knew what He was intending to do.

You should underline the phrase that Jesus Himself knew what He would do. What a tremendous thought this is! As you serve Jesus Christ, as you are confronted with human need; such as hungry people, Jesus Christ knows already what He is going to do in meeting that need through you.

I read a sermon by Charles Spurgeon on this great text. He quoted George Mueller, who was a contemporary of his, although much older. This phrase, ". . . He Himself knew what He was intending to do," was, according to Spurgeon, Mueller's favorite text in the New Testament. If you have ever read of George Mueller, then you understand that this man lived on the brink of disaster. He was always, it seemed, close to being bankrupt.

Mueller ran orphanages for thousands of boys and girls in England. He would come to a time in his life and in the life of the orphanage, where he would sit all of the children, hundreds of them, at the table, with their small platter and water-filled cup in front of them, but there was no food. Mueller would stand and say, "Let's thank God for our meal."

Those children were about to learn some tremendous blessings about the sovereignty of God.

Mueller records of this occasion, as he was standing and thanking God for the meal, that halfway through his prayer, there was a knock on the door. A man, who ran the bakery in town and Mueller knew well, was standing at the door. The man said, "George, my cart just lost a wheel and bread has spilled all over the street. The packages are torn and I know the people I'm selling it to will not want it. There is nothing wrong with it, though. Could you use a few loaves?"

I would imagine Mueller said, "I've got about a hundred or so kids who would be glad to unload that cart."

We read in this text, “. . . He Himself knew what He was intending to do,” – even when He asked Philip. I like that phrase.

Then, notice John 6:7.

Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, for everyone to receive a little.”

Two hundred denarii is about eight months wages in that day. Philip said it was not sufficient.

2. Secondly, the apostle Andrew responds with a little faith.

Look at what happens next, in John 6:8-9a. This is great.

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, . . .”

Andrew seems to be as impetuous as his brother Peter. He has already scoped the audience and found a young boy with some food.

Barley bread was for the poorest of the poor. Barley bread was bread that was eaten by the poverty stricken. It was a course, rough, dry bread, made not of wheat, but barley. The loaves were flat and round, something like a pancake today. They would fit in the palm of a child’s hand. There was a little lad in this crowd who had five loaves.

This lad also had two small fish. They were actually two little “tarichaea,” or little sardines. The Sea of Galilee swarmed with these little sardine-like fish. People would catch them, pickle them, and eat them as relish.

So there is a little boy with five small, flat loaves of bread, or little pancakes of barley bread, and two little pickled fish to help the dry bread go down. Andrew finds him and says to Jesus, “I know Philip just said it can’t be done, but I think something might be done. Here are five loaves and two little sardines.”

I think all of the other disciples probably rolled on the ground in laughter at this. Andrew probably starts kicking himself, and says to the Lord, in John 6:9b,

“. . . but what are those for so many people?”

In other words, “It was so foolish of me to even bring this up.”

Let us read, in fact, what he says again, in John 6:9.

“There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish, . . .”

Then, the disciples probably start laughing.

“. . . but what are these for so many people.”

Andrew says, with his foot in his mouth, “Excuse me, Lord, for even suggesting such a ludicrous thought. How ridiculous.”

Notice, however, what Jesus does, in John 6:10a.

Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” . . .

I think, all of the sudden, all of the laughter stopped.

Let me read, from one commentary, the differences in the responses of Philip and Andrew.

Philip said, “The situation is hopeless.”

Andrew said, “A miracle is possible.”

Philip produced figures to show what could not be done.

Andrew brought food, hoping something could be done.

And to Philip, Jesus would reveal His superiority to statistical impossibilities.

To Andrew, Jesus justified faith, even so small.

Look at John 6:10b-11,

. . . Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. Jesus then took the loaves, and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted.

Do not miss this now. Jesus could have snapped His fingers and before each person, on the grass, a table could have been spread. He could have clapped His hands and a banquet feast could have been prepared, while His disciples, in their embarrassment, just watched. Yet, Jesus still designed to use them, even though their faith was so small.

I do not know how it happened, but the miracle occurred in the hands of Jesus Christ. He had that little sardine, which is about the size of a thumb, and He just starts breaking off pieces. He gets a handful and hands it to one of the disciples. That disciple perhaps, puts it in his “kophinos,” or his wicker basket. All Jews carried a “kophinos” with them to keep food in that was supposedly clean. Perhaps the disciples had theirs with them. They filled their

“kophinos” and began distributing the little pickled fish pieces. Jesus just keeps breaking.

How long would it have taken to break fish for about 20,000 people? I imagine it would take an hour or so, or maybe even longer.

Now let us look at the response of the crowd. They understood exactly what was happening. They did not miss it. They knew that Jesus Christ had just performed a miracle. In fact, John 10:15 will record that at the end of this miracle, the crowd will come to Jesus to force a coronation. They said, in John 10:14b,

. . . This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.

The people said this because in Deuteronomy 18:15, Moses said to the people,

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you . . .

Do not miss this. Moses, while out in the wilderness, prayed and then, God sent manna to feed the nation.

What we have in this text, is a sign, a Messianic sign. Jesus, being the Messiah, prayed to God and then, provided food for the people in the wilderness. The people caught it. They said, “He must be the Messiah. He, at least, is the prophet that Moses declared would come.”

How to Serve Without Selfishness

Now Philip had no faith and Andrew had little faith. I think the miracle was designed to teach the disciples, even though their faith was so small, how to serve without selfishness. Let me give two thoughts of how to serve without selfishness.

You are a disciple of Jesus Christ if you have accepted Him as your personal Savior. He has entrusted to you the ministry of distributing the food to people; of meeting of needs for those in need. How can you serve without getting caught up with your greatness? Let me give two ways.

1. First, we can serve without selfishness by understanding that our priority in ministry is others, not ourselves.

That is the practical nature of grace – giving.

Grace is “unrecompensed kindness and favor,” as defined by Lewis Chafer in his classic book, *The Fundamentals of Grace*.

Do you think that Peter caught it? I think he did because in I Peter 5:2 (KJV), he writes,

Feed the flock of God which is among you . . .

The priority of ministry is meeting the needs of those around you, in the body and outside. I think he caught it.

2. Secondly, we can serve without selfishness by understanding that our resource for ministry is Christ, not ourselves.

That is the theological nature of grace – our resource for ministry is Christ.

I want to give two thoughts on this.

- Remember, ladies and gentlemen, that Jesus will use what we give Him, just as He did in this situation. He could have created fish and bread out of thin air, but He chose to use that which was surrendered to Him. What a tremendous application that is to you and to me.
- Also, remember that He is the One that creates, and we are the ones that distribute.

Suggestions From Peter’s “Failures”

Now look back at John 6:12.

When they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments so that nothing will be lost.”

The original word for “filled,” literally means “stuffed”. The people were so filled that they were stuffed. Jesus then tells the disciples to gather up the leftovers.

It is interesting, and we are going to study this more thoroughly in our next discussion, but Jesus broke at least four traditional laws in these miracles. We are going to take an in-depth look at hypocrisy, as represented by the Pharisees, versus true holiness, in our next discussion. Jesus Christ shattered at least four traditions in these miracles and I am only going to mention one today.

Jesus broke one tradition in the fact that He gathered all of the leftover fragments. It was against the law to gather anything that was not eaten because it was ceremonially unclean. Yet, Jesus said, “Don’t waste this.”

Jesus did not go around to each individual and say, “Oh, you didn’t finish that loaf of bread? Well, let me have it back.”

He asked the disciples to collect that which was at His feet that He had broken off and had not passed out. They filled twelve baskets full. Look at John 6:13-15.

So they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” So, Jesus perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Continue to John 6:16-19. The disciples will now start to cross in a boat to Capernaum. Remember that this is about a five hour trip. A storm arises, which is sovereignly designed.

Now when evening came, His disciples went down to the sea, and after getting into a boat, they started to cross the sea to Capernaum. It had already become dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea began to be stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. Then, when they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and drawing near to the boat; and they were frightened.

They had spent, at this point, about nine hours rowing, with their backs against the wind. They were rowing as hard as they could and the wind was being whipped about. In nine hours, they had gone less than three miles. Then, they see Jesus walking on the water, coming near the ship. The last phrase is almost inevitable, “. . . and they were frightened.”

Look at John 6:20.

But He said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.”

Matthew fills in this story. Turn to Matthew, chapter 14, and let us find out what happens. Look at Matthew 14:27b-28

. . . Jesus spoke to them, saying, “. . . it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter said to Him, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.”

I love this. Peter is a fascinating guy. He has an opportunity in this, to do something that no other disciple has ever done. We need to go back to Mark 5 to understand the reason that Peter was getting himself into trouble.

The disciples had just been sent out with all of the authority of Jesus Christ. If Jesus could do it, they could do it. If Jesus could heal, they could heal. If Jesus could raise someone from the dead, they could do it because He said, “Now, *you* can raise someone from the dead.” If Jesus could perform any kind of miracle, now *they* can do it.

So Peter sees Jesus walking on the water and he thinks, scratching his head, “Well, if Jesus can do it, I can do it. So, Lord, if it’s really You, can I come to You?”

In Matthew 14:29a, we read,

And He said, “Come!” . . .

I think Jesus probably chuckles to Himself.

Notice what happens, in Matthew 14:29b.,

. . . And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

We do not want to be too hard on Peter. He is the only one who got out of the boat. The other disciples were clinging to the sides of that little craft. Peter got out of the boat, went down that little rope ladder, and climbed out. And, he walked on the water toward Jesus. Then, look at Matthew 14:30a.

But seeing the wind, he became frightened, .

. .

Peter gets out and perhaps, takes a few steps, and notices that his sandals are dry. He thinks, “This is fantastic!” Then, he looks up and notices the breaker coming toward him and the wind. He suddenly realizes all of this and thinks, and this is all between the lines in the text, “Wait a second! What in the world am I doing out here walking on the water?”

Peter becomes frightened. Look at Matthew 14:30b. Notice his words in this verse.

. . . and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

That prayer would never work in this century. What kind of prayer is that – “Lord, save me!”? Who does Peter think he is serving? A merciful God? People do not pray like that today!

As a matter of fact, I leaned back in my chair in my study and let my imagination run. I created a

prayer for this century. If Peter were sinking in this day, this is what he would pray. It may be a little convicting, so I will read it quickly.

“Oh Lord, thank You for the many blessings of this day. I thank You that You are the creator and sustainer of all life. I believe that You created this ocean, but I also believe my feet are getting wet. But You know all about that, Lord. In fact, I thank You for hearing my prayer, even before I ask it. And, Lord, I think my waist is now wet. I want You to know, Lord, that I just apologize for coming to You today. I came yesterday, and the day before, and the day before that, and the month before that. I can understand if You’re a little upset, but there’s water up to my neck. Now I deserve to tread water for at least an hour, Lord, to do penance. But, Lord, You know that I’m not a good swimmer, so in Your infinite mercy, might You reach down from the portals of heaven and take my hand and lift me up? Amen and Amen.”

Have you ever prayed like that? We almost apologize to the Lord because we have failed. There we are, going under, and we go to the Lord and start buttering Him up, “You’re the creator . . .” and all of this. And, “Lord, I apologize and I’m so frail.” He knows that. He can see you up to your neck.

What truth Peter gives to us. It is very simple. When you are going under, simply pray, “Lord, would You save me? I’m about to drown.”

Let me give several suggestions from Peter’s failure.

1. First, Peter failed after training.

Peter was a disciple of Jesus Christ. He had been living with Him, at this point in time, for two years. He had it all together. He thought, “I know the score. I know exactly where I’m going.”

Peter failed after at least, two years of training.

One writer said, “The ministry of serving Jesus Christ is like a bicycle with training wheels – and you never take the training wheels off.”

We never get to the point where we can say, “Okay, Lord, I’ve mastered the ministry. I’ve got the four laws down the Romans road and I can even lead a person to Christ in the book of Psalms. I’ve got it all mastered. Now I can do it myself.”

Peter failed after training.

2. Secondly, Peter failed in obedience to the will of God.

The Lord said, “Come!”

Here you are, right in the middle of doing what God wants you to do, and pride invades your heart.

Here you are serving the Lord, when you are suddenly filled with covetous thoughts.

You think, “Wait a second, Lord! Here I am, serving you. I thought I’d be impervious to that kind of stuff.”

No. Peter failed while he was doing the will of God. Have you ever done that?

3. Thirdly, Peter failed until praying. He failed after training, in obedience, and until praying.

How to Fail Without Falling

Now, in order for you and I to fail, as we will at times, without falling, we need to understand at least two things. There are many more, but at least two.

1. First, the practical nature of grace is in this thought – obedience to Christ does not remove the obstacles.

The Lord Jesus sent the disciples into the storm. He allowed them to row until their backs felt like they might break and until their arms were very sore. That was part of His will. He sent them into it.

He called Peter out of it, and said, “Okay, Peter, come to Me.”

Just because you are obeying Jesus Christ does not mean that the rough water is all of the sudden, going to be made smooth. Obedience does not remove obstacles.

2. Secondly, as to the theological nature of grace – deep waters are never intended to drown us, but to develop us.

The grace of God is not intended to work in our lives in such a way that He sinks us. However, He intends that we not be pampered disciples, but strong disciples. So He stirs up the water on occasion, to develop us.

Did Peter learn this truth? Yes. In the later years of his life, he wrote in I Peter 5:5b-6,

God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,

That is another way of saying, “Humility before honor. Grace before greatness.”

Conclusion

Do you have aspirations of greatness today, my friend? Are you climbing to the top of the heap? Are you going to get there, no matter what? Perhaps, in ministry, you are going to make sure that a certain individual hears you out. Do you have thoughts that now, within yourself, you have reached the point where you can take off the training wheels? Do you think, “God, what a blessing You got when You received me.”

What is your impression of yourself today?

Marian Anderson was finally accepted. She began voice lessons and became a rather famous lady. One day, when Marian was an older woman, a reporter asked, “Marian, what is the greatest moment of your entire career?”

What a selection she had to choose from. Perhaps it was receiving the award from the President of the United States, for freedom. Perhaps it was being a delegate, representing the United States, to the United

Nations. Maybe it was performing privately for President and Mrs. Eisenhower and for the King and Queen of England. Perhaps it was writing a book that would become a best seller. She had all of these things to choose from. Yet, as a very gracious lady who had learned grace, she responded to this reporter, “The greatest day in my life was when I went home to my mother and told her, ‘Ma Ma, you don’t have to take in washing anymore.’”

Marian Anderson never forgot where she came from.

I believe every disciple of Jesus Christ who will serve Him effectively; who will serve without selfishness; who will be able to fail graciously without falling, must remember where they came from. And, by remembering, not to wallow in past sin, as Paul said to forgive, but to just remember the flesh that they are made of. I think Jesus Christ can use us, as His disciples, as we learn that grace comes before greatness.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/31/1988 by Stephen Davey.

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