



Christ's Perfect Provision-Part 3

When the Task Seems Impossible

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Well, we can and should be grateful that we live in a day where you can pick up the phone, dial three little numbers, and have people rushing to help you when you are in need. That's a big deal—that we have that privilege here in this technological age to call 911 and have emergency response and people coming to give us aid. That's fantastic. And about 240 million people every year in this country alone are dialing 911. Probably many of you, if not most of you in this room, have at some point dialed 911 in your life. And it is so simple and so easy.

One of the problems, though, with having help at our beck and call—and having it so easy to call for help—is that people begin to stop seeing themselves as helpers. “Oh, I can call 911 if you have a problem,” but to see myself get personally involved, you know, that's become less and less of a way that people see themselves in the midst of crisis. So much so that it's given rise to a whole body of laws in modern jurisprudence that usually is under the heading of something like the responsibility to aid, or the responsibility to assist laws, or the duty to rescue laws. Sometimes it's just popularly known as the Good Samaritan laws—that if you have the ability to help and there's a crisis or a need before you, well then you have a moral obligation, in this case even a legal obligation, to get involved and to personally help.

Now that it's named the Good Samaritan law in all of its derivations, that should give us a clue that this is not altogether a new thing. Clearly, this phrase comes from a 2,000-year-old story in Luke 10, where Jesus says, you know, there are people here that just walked right past a man who'd been beaten, and he was bleeding, and he was left for dead. And they just walked right by him. I mean, clearly, this is an old problem that may be exacerbated by how easy it is for us to call for help. But, you know, people have been passing by needs and having all these thoughts about, “Well, that's a real problem, but I'll let someone else deal with it.” That's been going on since those days—and before.

If I were to ask you, just based on your memory, just based on what you know of that story—if I were to say, “Well, what reasons did Jesus give us for the priest and the Levite walking by the battered and beaten man? What reasons did Jesus say those men had for passing that man in need?”—I wonder what your memory would surface if I asked you that question. You might come up with some that you think are there in the text, because as we teach it to our kids down the hall in the kids ministry, we usually fill in the blank with some reasons why they passed by him, and the commentators are full of suggestions as well. But if you were to look at the passage, you'd realize that Jesus didn't give any reasons. The



men didn't have a long list of reasons that the priest and the Levite said, "Well, I'm not getting involved in this."

And I think that, in part, is because we really don't need Jesus to itemize and articulate the reasons, because we've all been in the situation where we've had a need that has arisen, and it's there before us, and we could get involved, but we choose not to. And we've always got reasons, and they're just quick to surface in our own minds as to why, "Well, I'm not the person that should be helping here."

Man, I can think about the profound needs in the Bible, like the needs of your coworkers to know the gospel of Jesus Christ. And I'm sure there are plenty of times you've had that opportunity that in your mind there's been some reason that, you know, "Well, I'm not the person that should be speaking up about this." Now, there have been needs, I suppose, with people that you've known that have been grieving and hurting and struggling, and you know that they're in that situation, and you've thought to yourself, "Well, there it is. I could step up, I suppose, but I'm not the right person to be dealing with this. I'm not a grief counselor. I'm not a therapist. How can I step into this?"

Or you open your bulletin and you see needs for people to be leaders in our youth ministry and disciple teenagers, and you think, "Well, I see that need, and I recognize it, but I'm not the right person to get involved in that. I don't know how I could be the right person with the right credentials to do that." Hosting a home fellowship group, taking someone through Partners, meeting a need when there's an obvious egregious sin in that circle that you run in and someone needs to confront it; having a challenge that needs to be met, or a problem that needs to be solved, an issue that needs to be made right—all of these things happen all the time to us. And it's easy for us to come up with reasons why someone else should do it and not us.

Interestingly, when Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, he told it to a lawyer. The question came from a lawyer who asked the question about who his neighbor was, and Jesus gave that story to show him that his neighbor was anybody that was in need. And I would hope that as the twelve apostles stood by and heard that story being told by Jesus to the lawyer, I'm hoping none of them really needed that story. I say that because it happens in Luke 10 that he tells the story to the question about the person trying to find a loophole in caring for his neighbor. And in Luke chapter 9, that we're studying this morning, we see that he taught the disciples this lesson in a way that was so profound and memorable. I trust all they did when Jesus talked about the Good Samaritan was nod their head because they knew that if there is a need that sits there before you and it surfaces in God's providence, you'd better do all you can to meet that need—even if you think you're under-clubbed and inadequate and you're not the person to meet the need. Jesus made it very clear: get involved, step up to the challenge, do whatever it is that you can do.



The story I'm referring to is a story we're going to study this morning in Luke chapter 9, verses 10 through 17. If you have your Bibles and you haven't opened up to that yet, please call that passage up. And I want to read this very familiar text to you, a story that I know you've known for years. All the disciples—this left some indelible marks, so much so that all four gospel writers recorded in great detail—Jesus feeds 5,000 people in a miraculous way. He not only did it once with 5,000; two of the gospel writers record that he did it a second time with 4,000 people. This was quite a memorable miracle of Christ.

Let me read it for you, and put yourself in the sandals of what's going on here. Beginning in verse number 10, glancing up to the beginning of the chapter where he sent the apostles out to do ministry and endowed them with a special authority. They come back now—it says, "On their return," verse 10—the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them—Christ did—and withdrew apart; they went away from the crowds to a town, really the outskirts or a region of the town called Bethsaida, as we'll see in a minute.

When the crowds learned of it, they followed him. And he—Christ—welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing.

Verse 12: Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve disciples came to Jesus—to him—and they said, "Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and to get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place."

But he said to them—here's the phrase that I want you to underline, underscore, highlight, and recognize that it was the kind of statement that I know they would never forget. In the middle of a situation they thought, "There's no way we have anything to offer," he puts his finger in their chest and he says, "You give them something to eat."

Now, I think it would take a lot for you to argue with the one that's calming the storms and raising the dead. I'm not going to be quick to snap back my disagreement to Christ, and I'm hoping the disciples felt the same way. So I'm sure they paused for a minute and looked at each other and gave a quick assessment of the situation. And yet they felt compelled to say, middle of verse 13, "Well, you do realize we don't have anything to give them. We have no more than five loaves and two fish." And as John, in the parallel passage, tells us, they had to bum that off some boy that happened to pack some



food in his backpack. That wasn't even theirs—unless, of course, you're suggesting, verse 13, "We go and buy food for all these people." And as the parallel text tells us, they even threw a number out: "This would take over 200 days' wages, and even then I don't think everyone would get something to eat."

Why was that such a big deal? Well, verse 14: there were about 5,000 men there. And as you remember from Sunday school, that didn't even represent women and children—although probably that's overstated in our imagination. These people had traveled to find Christ, and there were probably mostly men there, although I can imagine there were some kids and some wives and girlfriends that were brought along.

He said to the disciples—we're middle of verse 14—"Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each." And they did so, beautifully, I'm sure with some embarrassment, thinking, "What are we setting ourselves up for here? We have no food." They served them and had them all sit down.

Verse 16: And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them—more on that interesting phrase a little bit later. Then he broke the loaves and he gave them to the disciples, and he did that so he could have them set it before the crowd.

And now here's the miraculous part of all this: with five loaves and two fish, verse 17, they all ate—all of them—and were satisfied. This wasn't, you know, finger foods at some hors d'oeuvres table. This was like Lucille's or Claim Jumper—they went out stuffed, full, satisfied. And what was left over—talk about a doggie bag—verse 17: they picked up twelve baskets of broken pieces.

This text, and the punch line, I think, that could never be forgotten in verse 13—that they were called to step up and do something when they thought they had nothing to offer—that is something that even in this context is modeled for them in verses 10 and 11. And many people miss it when they read it, but you have to catch a little bit of the context. And I do think some of the parallel passages in Mark and in Matthew give us, perhaps, a little bit more that may be helpful for you to understand.

And that is, in verses 10 and 11, they've returned from all this ministry. They're tired. Jesus had been doing ministry—he was tired. As a matter of fact, it says in Mark they were so tired and so busy they



had no time to even rest or have meals. So they were hungry, overworked, and needed some downtime. So he withdrew and went apart to this town called Bethsaida.

Now you need to understand this too: Mark also tells us there was some concern in Jesus's heart. As we saw in a little interlude last week with Herod scratching his head about who the Christ was, and the mention of the beheading of John the Baptist, there was clearly, in the parallel passages, a sense of grief in Jesus's heart—that he had to get away and kind of recover from the loss of John the Baptist. He not only was killed; he was killed in the egregious, awful way by having his head chopped off. And that affected Jesus emotionally, and he wasn't in the mood to be ministering to anybody. Tired, overworked, no meals, grieving over the loss of John the Baptist.

But when the crowds learned of it, they followed him. And as we learned in the other passages, it wasn't just that they got in boats and followed; they ran around the shore to see where on this boat on the horizon he was going, and they got there before they even landed. Picture the crowds on the shore as they're dragging the boats up on the sand of the shore of the Sea of Galilee. They're met with this huge crowd, and I'm thinking to myself, "There's got to be a way to talk my way around this—either that or turn the boat around, Peter, and let's just keep going somewhere else." That's how Christ felt.

Now, before you say, "Well, he may have looked like Clark Kent, but, you know, he was Superman, and he was fueled by some force we don't know anything about," you need to understand the divinity of Christ—in no way does the divinity of Christ diminish the humanity of Christ. And it's often said in a non-mathematical way that we say it: Jesus was not only 100% God; he was also 100% man. And because of that, he was so vulnerable to the frailties of humanity that he could be crucified and murdered on a cross—completely dead. He could also be so fatigued that he was parched for food and water. In John 4 he had to send his disciples ahead to get lunch for him, while he almost collapsed there by the well in Sychar and wasn't even able to go in to get food. He could get physically tired. He could be grief-stricken and shed real tears because of real emotion in his heart. And here he is, with real grief over the loss of his friend and his relative, John the Baptist—he's in no emotional state or physical state, and his hunger pains are very real, like the rest of the disciples. He was in no shape to be giving of himself.

And yet, verse 11, the middle of verse 11: with all the crowds there wanting to talk to him, wanting to have him teach them, wanting Jesus to heal their sick, it says—underline this word—he welcomed them. He welcomed them. And then he got to work: he spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing.



Now, if there's something that shows me that Christ is going to set himself up as a pattern of looking in the resources of his own humanity and saying, "I have no energy, I have no patience, I have no emotional wherewithal to be giving of myself to this crowd right now," he fights through all of that lack of personal provision and he gives himself in faith to the challenge of the crowd saying, "Hey, we want to hear from you." And that's a strong word, by the way—welcomed. I know it's sometimes translated from the root of the word that we have here, *dechomai*, and I've described that a lot because it's such a strong biblical word—of Simeon taking the baby Jesus into his arms. It's translated "receive" or "welcome," but it now has a prefix on the front, *apo* in Greek, the preposition that compounds the whole thing. He welcomed them up—he brought them to himself—and he was just so embracing of the crowd. That's a big word for a guy who does not feel right now like teaching anything.

Think about that. This was fighting through the feelings of being spent and sad. And he says, "Hey, I'm ready." It's the same word, by the way—remember when the swine went into the Sea of Galilee, and you had the Legion, the guy there, the demoniac in the Gerasenes? And after they said, "You're spooking us out, this is weird; leave our town," and they kicked him out—remember, he went back to Capernaum. It said the people of Capernaum *apodechomai*-ed him—they welcomed him. And he got to work. And now they come and search him out when he's trying to get a little weekend respite and some rest for his disciples, and now he—same word—*apodechomais* them, welcomes them.

Number one on your outline—let's put it this way: Jesus sets the pattern for us. We need to have enough faith to welcome the challenge. And I mean that because Christ, in his humanity, had to trust in the Father that he was going to be able to have the wherewithal in the midst of not feeling like it to give himself to this crowd.

You've been there before. There's an opportunity—you want to talk about a reason for passing by a challenge: "I don't feel up to it. I need rest. I need recuperation. Let someone else do it. I'm too busy. I've got to care for my health; I've got to care for my mental health; I've got to be careful here how I spend myself because I don't want to burn out." Jesus had the faith to say, "You know what, there's a need. I'm going to welcome it. I'm going to step up to it." And I'm going to, in the words of the Apostle Paul, be willing to spend and be expended for the souls of these people. That's a great line—to spend and be expended.

Kind of welcome the challenge that you face, believing a few things. Number one, that God is sovereign. And when I think about God's sovereignty and providence in my life, I've got to realize that the challenges that I'm exposed to—and for you, I don't know what it is—could be the challenge of just managing your marriage, or surviving parenting with your kids, or stepping up to that challenge of



confronting that sin, or meeting the need in that particular moment of your home fellowship group, or the non-Christians in your office, or whatever it might be—that challenge, you’ve got to understand that that is something that has been presented to you out of the multitude of crises and problems and needs around the world. God has put you in this place to at least be exposed to those.

Now, I’m not saying every need in your life is a call, as my old pastor used to say. I understand that every need is not a call. You’re not called to meet every need that you see. But I just don’t want the default position in your life to be, “I’m sure God doesn’t want me involved in this. He knows I’m tired. He knows I’m spent. He knows I’m under-clubbed for this. He knows I’m not prepared for this.” Don’t think that way. You need to be slow to dismiss the challenge. And ask yourself the question, “Did God providentially put me face to face with this challenge because he wants me to meet it? Am I willing to welcome the challenge? Could it be that even in my own feeling of inadequacy, that God wants me to be the one to step up and do this?”

You’ve got to have the faith to believe that God can do this even when you don’t feel like you’re able—believing in the providence of God.

Let me round this out—two more things I will always want you to keep in mind when you see, providentially, a need right before you, whatever that might be. Number two—let’s put it this way, letter B, if you will—not only should you recognize the providence of God, the sovereignty of God; you should recognize that God is never into self-preservation. Jot that down, would you? God is not big on self-preservation.

Let me give you a verse that should make this crystal clear for you. I’ll actually give you two verses—Luke chapter 17, verses 32 and 33. Now, I would give you one verse—it’s verse 33, and some of you have memorized it—and it says this: “The one who seeks to preserve his life will”—you know the rest of it—“lose it.” But the one who’s willing to lose his life—as the parallel text says, for Christ’s sake—they’ll keep it.

See, we’re in a culture right now that is so concerned about you burning out, being overtaxed, getting involved and spreading yourself too thin, that all the talk, it seems—even among Christians—is self-preservation. “Careful now. Careful. Don’t go too far. Don’t do too much.” And I think any friend who has any picture of modernity in their own mind—if we just transport someone from the 21st century back—there’s not one friend of Christ that’s going to say to Christ, “Hey, you know what, you’re right. Let’s start preaching right now to this crowd. You’re right, let’s start here. Let’s line their sick up and



let's have you heal them." You're going to say, "Oh, this is not good for you. You're in no state of mind for this. Protect here. Circle the wagons. You've got to guard your downtime."

Now, I understand: we've got to get ahead of schedule and rest into our lives. But this providential mass of people that said, "Jesus, we want to hear from you"—he saw that as something and modeled for us where he wasn't willing to preserve his own comfort, preserve his own health, even. He was willing to spend and be expended.

I say two verses because verse 33 is the kicker, which says those who want to preserve their life are going to lose it—there's the upside-down principle. But the verse before that is a good verse for you to know, if for nothing else because if you don't know the Bible very well, some people ask you, "Do you have any verses memorized?" I know when I was a kid, I always said, "Jesus wept," because it was the shortest verse in the Bible. But here's another one you can add to the arsenal because there's only one word longer. It's three words in English. Ready? Here it comes: "Remember Lot's wife." That's Luke 17:32.

Now why would that be juxtaposed to the principle that the one who wants to preserve his life is going to lose it? Well, I know why—because I know the story of Lot's wife. What happened to Lot's wife? She became a salt lick for camels, right, in the desert. Do you know the story? I know—that's gross, sorry. But she's certainly an advisory tale for us, a cautionary tale of a woman who was told to leave her town because God was going to judge it. And she was going out with Lot, and God gave her very specific instructions: "Don't look back," remember that? Which, by the way, is how our chapter in Luke 9 is going to end metaphorically: the one who puts his hand to the plow and keeps looking back—not fit for the kingdom.

There's something about the connection between self-preservation and this visual: "I've got to look back longingly at my hometown; there's my life I'm leaving it behind." You know, it's like burning the ships—you're in it; you're following Christ. The past is past. You've given up—in Christ's terms here in Luke 9—you've given up your afternoon of rest; you've given up your chance to have this little roundtable with the disciples and have a tranquil afternoon where we all get recuperated. You're going to not look back at that. The only thing worse, almost, than someone who's not willing to meet the need is someone who steps up to meet the need and is always complaining about what they're giving up to meet the need. Am I right? Stop. Don't look back.



Yeah, Lot's wife was walking in step with Lot away from the towns that God was judging, but she was looking back. And God said, "Don't do that." Longingly looking back. Listen, the one who wants to preserve his life—lose it. The one who's going to lose his life—that's the one who keeps it.

I know some of you have been told, "Listen, you're stretching yourself too thin. I know there are needs to host a home fellowship group or get involved in discipling those teens in the church or doing Awana ministry, but you know what? You're out too many nights. You've got TV to watch on Thursday nights—you don't have time for this. Relax." In the words of J. Vernon McGee—remember his old line?—he'd say, and I'd do it in the twang if I could do it (I'm not good at impersonations): "It'd be much better to burn out than to rust out." Remember that old line?

Some of you are so concerned about that that you would tell Jesus, "Whoa, just take the day off." Jesus shows something that he's about to ask his disciples to do. "I know you don't think you have the resources to teach all afternoon, to heal these people, but I'm telling you: step out by faith and welcome the challenge that lies before you."

I said I'd give you three things. There's to remember God's sovereignty; know that God is not big on self-preservation. Here's number three—I'd like you to turn to this one: Acts chapter 20. Acts chapter 20. Let's start in verse 35. Paul is saying goodbye to his—I mean, I hate to say it—his favorite church. He was there for three years in Ephesus; he could have retired there. And yet he was called to move on to Jerusalem to do something that he knew by God's revelation to him would be filled with persecution and struggle and sacrifice. And yet he was going to leave it all behind. And he wasn't going to look back. It was going to be painful to leave the church at Ephesus.

And he's giving them all these things that he wants them to remember as he speaks to the leaders of the church. And then verse 35, after talking about his work ethic and about, you know, not being a burden to people, not mooching off of people's money, says this: "In all things I have shown you," Acts 20:35—are you with me on this?—"that by working hard in this way, we must help the weak." Now, I know there are other solutions here; I could have done this and that and not have had to do all that hard work. But I did all the hard work, and I did that knowing that in doing that I could help—I could help the weak. "And I've shown you that by example." And then here comes the motivation—the third thing I want to emphasize: "and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said"—while not recorded in the Gospels, here come some red letters in the middle of the book of Acts—quote: "It is more blessed to give than to receive."



That's a great line. You need to know this. While the world's saying, "It's better—more blessing—for you to receive and protect and preserve; it's better for you to really size up the situation," or "No, there is time for you to slow down and to reserve yourself and to keep yourself and to guard yourself and to not stretch yourself too thin," Jesus said the more blessed thing to do is, when you see that opportunity—and the context here—you can help those that need help. More blessed to give than to receive.

He wasn't talking about the sacrifice in his life—and we could go on, verses 36 through 38. He was going to say goodbye to them after this prayer meeting; they were weeping and embracing and kissing Paul; they were being sorrowful most of all because of the word that he had spoken about him in verse 38—that they would not see his face again. And they sorrowfully walked him to the ship. And he was willing to move ahead at great cost to himself to do the will of God, knowing that giving his life to what needed to be done in God's plan for him and the challenges that he faced was a more "blessing" place to be. And by that I mean—that's a Bible word—but think about it: the good thing that God does for those that are willing to give. It's a good place to be—giving rather than receiving.

Having a faith to welcome the challenge—you know it's going to cost you. I know you won't feel up to it; I know you'll be out of energy or out of motivation—or all the reasons you can use like the Levite and the priest to pass by the opportunity—but you need to start doing more of what Christ asked us to do: to see the need and be willing to welcome it, because God can supply, and he's about to show that in verses 12 through 15 in Luke 9.

Take a look at this. The day began to wear on—you know this story, printed there on your worksheet. The twelve came and said something very reasonable: "Hey, you know what? You've been working all day with this crowd; we've been working with you in this crowd. And I'm telling you, it's time to wrap up the preaching here and send them away—send the crowd away to go to the surrounding villages." Now, remember: you've got 5,000 men in this crowd—and then some; 7,000–8,000 people maybe, maybe more. "Time to send them home. They can go get lodging," middle of verse 12, "they can go get their provisions, because right here, you know, is a desolate place. There's no place for food."

"But he said to them"—now the very thing that he was doing, thinking they don't have the resources—"You give them something to eat." And he knows they didn't bring a food truck with them. So he knows they don't have it. "But," he said, "I want you to take what you do have, and I want you to feed them." And again, there must have been some pausing and a lot of looking at each other. "We don't have much. We do have something, and we had to get that from the kid with his lunch: I've got five loaves and two fish. And that's not much. I guess we could go into town and buy food for these people. We don't have 200 denarii to spend on that, so we don't even have that. This would cost a fortune to



feed these guys one meal—5,000 people.” “And he said to the disciples, ‘Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.’ And they did so, and he had them all sit down.”

Now, this is risk, though. You are now stepping forward with what seems like a paltry offering to give to something; the need seems way beyond whatever you have to offer. And you are going around saying, “Let’s sit you guys in groups of fifty. Let’s sit you guys in groups of fifty. Sit you guys...” This is—I mean, you want to talk about embarrassed—I’m going to walk around a little bit embarrassed here thinking, “I know all we have is five loaves and two fish, but Jesus wants you to sit down and we’re about to feed you what we got.”

Number two on your outline: that would take a lot of faith for me to walk around and arrange people in groups of fifty knowing all I had was five loaves and two fish. But that’s the faith we need—to have faith enough to personally meet the need. “Oh, but I don’t have enough.” I know. Personally meet the need with whatever it is you have. Be willing to say, “I don’t have all the knowledge; I don’t have all the experience; I don’t have all that it takes, but I’m going to do what I can in this situation, bringing all that I can to this situation to try and meet the need.”

It’s tough. You know, in the responsibility to assist and the duty to rescue laws—or the Good Samaritan laws as they come—if you look those up in the law books you’ll find, in jurisprudence, there’s all these exceptions. In other words, there is a moral obligation for you to help when you can help—but you don’t have to if this, and you don’t have to if that, and you’re off the hook if this criteria is met, and if it might do this to you, and if it might... I’ve read the laws. There’s all kinds of exceptions depending on what state you’re looking at of what gets you off the hook—with the exception of two sacred relationships. In a lot of the laws that I’ve seen, there are two things that clarify that the exception to the list of exceptions is that if you’re to that person in one of two sacred bonds—and one of them is marriage. It’s one thing for me to look at your wife in need—or you in need—and say, “Well, if I’m just going to follow the laws of the land, I am morally obligated and now legally obligated to get involved, unless, of course, it may cost me this, and it might be that, and so I’ve got all these exceptions.” But I couldn’t pass my spouse, or my wife. Those exceptions don’t apply. The exception for the exceptions is that if it happens to be my own spouse, then I’ve got to get involved, and all these excuses as to why I can’t get involved—they’re gone.

And the other sacred relationship, I think you know—and for most of you, I hope it’s intuitive; I hope it’s intuitive for your spouse—but you are required. There are no exceptions. If you are the parent—if you’re the parent—doesn’t matter. This is your child; you have to intervene if they’re in need. It is your responsibility, and you can’t look at what it’s going to cost, or what it’s going to cost me, or what damage it might do to me. I’m the parent—I have to get involved.



Let me add a third one that the California Penal Code won't list, and I don't do it on the authority of the state of California. I'm going to do it on the authority of the God who made the world. And here's what he says—let me add a third one to that—and that's this: if they're a brother or sister in Christ, the exceptions go out the window.

Let me give you a verse for that to give you the authority of heaven on this: 1 John chapter 3, verse 16, and add 17 to that—1 John chapter 3, verses 16 and 17. Now, most of you grew up learning as your first: John 3:16. By God's providence in the very late numbering of the chapters and verses, it just so happens that John 3:16 looks a lot like 1 John 3:16. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish [but have] everlasting life." You know that passage. 1 John 3:16 sounds a lot the same: "By this we know love"—think of John 3:16—yeah, he gave his only begotten Son—"that he laid down his life for us." God so loved the world, and Christ so loved us that he laid down his life for us. So the rest of verse 16 says, "We ought to"—and that's a big word in Greek; we have to, are obligated to; we have no excuses to get out of it—"we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

Context here—as John writes to local congregations, in this case his people that he's writing to in that church—you've got brothers and sisters in that locale. You are morally obligated—you're legally obligated in God's law—for you to meet those needs. That's a sacred bond.

"Well, okay, if ever I have to be martyred for you, I'm okay. I guess I'm going to have to be willing to be crucified just like Christ was crucified." Well, that would be great—and you would rarely, if ever, employ that, and that would be a good thing for you to think through, I suppose. But verse 17 makes very clear that I doubt that's going to be a daily experience for you—but this one will be. Know this now, verse 17: "If anyone has the world's goods"—and you've got some—"and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him," then he asks a rhetorical question: "How then does the love of God abide in him?" How in the world can you say that God's love was poured out in his heart—to put it in the terms of Romans, as Paul put it—or, in verse 14 it says earlier, "We know we've passed out of death into life"—we know we're no longer lost, we're Christians—"because we love the brothers."

So I have love in my heart for my brothers and sisters in Christ if I'm truly regenerate, and the Bible says this is a matter of my heart—whether or not I personally get involved to meet a need. If I've got the wherewithal and the resources and something that can help, and my sister or my brother in Christ is in need, all the exceptions go out the window. I've got to step up. Now, I've got a choice though in my flesh. I can close my heart against them. That's where I love the Gospel of Mark when it recalls the



feeding of the 5,000. Let me read that passage to you, which gives us one word we don't get in Luke. Verse 34 says when Christ went ashore and he saw the great crowd, "he had compassion on them." There's the word. "Because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And so he began to teach them many things."

Same as 1 John 3:17: I've got a choice. I can close down my heart, and I can say, "Yeah, there's a need there. Yeah, there's a problem there. Yeah, there's an opportunity there. There's something that can be fixed there. There's something that I can do—but I'm not going to feel the compassion that Christ feels." We've got to be willing to recognize that the hallmark of real Christianity, the sign that you are truly saved, is that you love other Christians. And when you see the need, you don't close your heart; you have compassion for the need. And if you have any opportunity to help them, you're going to do it.

"Well, that person is grieving, and that couple lost their child, and that woman lost her husband. I'm not a grief counselor. I was not trained; I don't have any certification. Send them to a therapist or a psychologist, or at least have the pastor call them." I don't—listen, that's the point of this passage. You may have five loaves and two fish, and the need may seem way beyond it. But because your heart is not closed, you're going to step up and give what you can—"I'm going to step up and do what I can." I mean it—personally involved in meeting the need.

I give you this illustration from 1 Samuel 17 purposefully, even though it doesn't feel like a love passage, but it's a story that you all know. And let me just have you think through it for a second. It's David, seeing a need and meeting the need. And it might not look like it's motivated by love, but it is described as something motivated by great zeal, and that really—I mean, that's an aspect of biblical love: a zealous, purposeful love that David had for God, that when he saw someone who mocked God and threatened God's people, he recognized that he could step up and do something, while everyone else was stymied.

You know the story—1 Samuel 17, very familiar, talk-about-flannelgraph stories you know from childhood. Here's David, who's just the shepherd boy keeping the sheep. He's the youngest of all of his brothers, and his brothers are all enlisted in the army out fighting the Philistines. And they're in the Valley of Elah. And they're at this standoff. They have the Philistines on one mountain range and the Israelites on the other, and down in the valley they bring the big giant out—Goliath.

David shows up to bring supplies. So he's like a water boy—think about this. He's bringing the Gatorade on the sidelines to the workers. And here are the soldiers who are fighting in the battle, and



really there's no fighting going on because here's this big giant, mockingly—he's defying the Israelites and the armies of God, defying them, mocking their God and mocking them. And David comes with his bread and his cheese, and the older brothers see him there. And David sees Goliath, and he's thinking, "I can't believe this. No one's doing anything about this."

He loves God. He loves God's people. He would one day shepherd God's people because he loves God and he loves God's people. And he sees this one who's a threat to God's people and mocking God, and his heart was stirred up with great zeal. And people were talking about, you know, Saul said—the king said—whoever kills this guy is going to get tax exemption for the rest of their life. He's even going to give his daughter to marry the person. And he's walking around going, "What? What are you talking about? Are you kidding? What's the king going to do for the guy? Why in the world would you need to be bribed to do this?"

Certainly not David's heart. David sees that, and everyone calls him arrogant. His older brothers: "You're just out here to see blood sport. What's wrong with you? Go back to the sheep. I bet you haven't even left anybody to watch Dad's sheep—what are you doing here?" And he goes into the king, and he gives him the pitch: "You know what? I may not be a trained warrior, but God has delivered me in the past. When there was a threat to the flock, I had a bear, I had a lion—I killed them. Look at what God did in empowering me to kill this ferocious lion. I'll go out there, and I'll kill that guy like I killed the lion and the bear."

Pretty persuasive. Saul's won over: "All right, well, go get geared up." Sends him into the locker room to get his armor on. And, of course, you know the story—none of that seemed to work. Too big, doesn't fit. I mean, he didn't even fit into the shoulder pads; it just didn't work for him. He can't wield the sword—he's not used to it at all. And he goes, "Listen, enough of that. I'm good with a slingshot." And I love the line where he gets his stones there in the brook, puts them in his belt, takes that slingshot, and then it said he ran to the battle line. And he said, "You come against me with all your stuff, all your weapons. I'm coming against you in the name of the LORD."

I'm talking about someone who seemed under-clubbed. You're talking about coming to a big potluck with thousands of people, and all you've got is two bags of food. This is David. Everyone calling him arrogant—overweening pride, confident beyond his years. It made no sense to be like him for this. And he ran to the battle line, and then the PG-13 part takes over. The rock goes deep into his forehead, he falls on the ground, he unsheathes Goliath's big sword, and lops his head off there in the Valley of Elah. It's like all the Israelites just shake themselves—"What is going on?" The Philistines start running, the Israelites chase them, they plunder them, they kill them. David is now known from that point on as the shepherd boy who killed Goliath.



All I'm saying is it may not always feel like love. It may not always look to other people watching you step up to meet a need like, "Well, there's a real loving person." They may even say you're arrogant, you're prideful—"What makes you think you can do anything about that?" But in your heart, if—like David—you're saying, "You know what, I'm going to personally get involved to meet this need; I'm going to do all that I can, because I can look into the past and see where God has used me in times I didn't think I could be used in that way. But if no one else is going to step up, I'm here. I'm ready to spend and be expended for the souls of these people." I've got enough faith to get personally involved at great risk to myself.

Thirdly, when it comes to the story of the feeding of the 5,000, I don't think there's anything more bizarre than what takes place in verses 16 and 17—in particular verse 16—when, after getting these people sat in groups of fifty (which I've got to think was a weird, faith-filled endeavor—"Okay, let's line you up to eat here, but we don't have anything but five loaves and two fish"), Jesus then, verse 16, takes those five loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, and he said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd, and they all ate and were satisfied, and there was leftover, and they picked up twelve baskets of broken pieces. Unbelievable.

Now, we've got to untangle verse 16. And let me try and define this for you, and then we can apply it. A lot of misunderstanding about this text, because from this text has come a lot of practices that people are engaged in—even at lunch today—where they're using words applied in the wrong way. And the one I'm thinking of here is this word "said a blessing over them," is how the ESV translates it. You may be asked by your friends at meal today to "say a blessing," and you may say, "Lord, bless the food." If you do that, I just want to let you know that's not what this text is saying. There's nothing in the Bible that would lead us to do that—you don't bless inanimate objects. Blessing—certainly any rabbi would know this, and any commentary really should understand—this is not about a magical statement said to the bread and fish that made them multiply. This is about him looking up to heaven—as any rabbi would do, any leader of his family would do—and blessing: the word "bless," compound word, "good" and "word." It's like the word "eulogy." I'm saying something good to whom? To the one I'm looking up to—to God. For what? For these provisions. For these five loaves and these two fish.

If you're into languages—you may, if you're a Greek student, and I know some of you are, and you read your Greek New Testament when I'm preaching from the Greek New Testament here, or from the New Testament in English—you need to understand, while this passage may look and lead people to think he's blessing the elements, he's certainly not blessing the elements because this is an accusative—right? They have all these—even nominative, genitive, ablative, dative—all these cases. The accusative case is the object case, and the blessing is not to the object; it's an accusative of



reference. Look this up in any Greek grammar book, and we have these phrases that clearly are him giving a blessing without the stated object, which is always God in the Bible—or God to people. And that blessing to God is given in reference to the things—to “them,” “was them,” the loaves and the fishes.

So, Jesus is—as John makes very clear in the language and syntax of that sentence—he is giving thanks to God. That’s what’s happening here. If you don’t believe me—I don’t know—here’s New Testament scholar Leon Morris, which speaks for a lot of commentators and linguists who say, “The verb ‘blessed’ does not mean that somehow Christ imparts a blessing to these physical objects. Of course not. Such an idea is found nowhere in Scripture. The meaning is that Jesus said a prayer of thanksgiving, as John clearly articulates.” The blessing is to God.

Now, with that defined, think this through. I now have sat the groups, and I’m one of the twelve at least that has taken the crowd and sat them in groups of fifty so that they can get their meal. What do we have? We have five loaves and two fish. We can hardly make five fish sandwiches out of this. I give it to Jesus, and he now says a blessing to God. “God, you are so good for providing for us today”—accusative of reference—for these things that we have. And I’m thinking—again, you’re talking about praying with your eyes open—“What are you talking about?” It’d be like the Fall Fest—let’s get a picture of 5,000-plus people. You’ve been to Fall Fest—thousands of people in and out. The truck couldn’t make it; the Taco Bell truck couldn’t make it; our barbecues wouldn’t start for the hot dogs. So we send you to Chick-fil-A, and you drive through and you go, “Oh, I forgot my wallet.” All you’ve got between the cushions is enough for a couple of chicken sandwiches. You come back—lines of people waiting to eat on October 31 in our parking lot. And I take that from you, and I say, “Well, that’s great. Let’s hand this to Jesus now, and he’s going to pray.” With two bags in hand he starts to say, “God, we are so... You are so good for these things that you’ve provided.” It’s a joke. It’s humorous. It seems pathetic.

Now again, you can say, “Well, this is Jesus—he knows what’s going to happen,” and I buy that in this case. You’re right—he knows what’s going to happen. But the disciples don’t know. They’re clearly praying with one eye open going, “What is this weird prayer of thanksgiving? Shouldn’t you be begging God right now—‘Please, this is all we have. We don’t know how we’re going to feed this crowd?’” That’s the prayer I should be hearing. No—I’m hearing this: “God, you’re so good to provide for us. Thank you so much for these five loaves and these two fish.” I don’t know the content of the prayer, but that’s clearly the idea here.

See, that’s a kind of faith—it’s just mind-blowing. And the disciples were hearing the prayer in hopes, I’m sure, that Jesus would see their faith grow. Listen, God is going to provide. I’m going to thank him



in advance for the provision. You're talking about faith—you need faith for that. Let's name it that, number three: we need to have enough faith to thank God in advance.

Now, you've got to be careful with this line, because I know it's been abused and misused by other people. I can't thank God in advance for things that God has not promised to do. But I can thank God in advance for things he has promised to do. Follow me now: thanking God in advance is a biblical paradigm.

Think this through. There are times in the Bible—let me give you some quick examples; you can write them down if you're note-takers. Romans chapter 4, verses 19 through 21—the story is told of Abraham. He's looking in the mirror; he's 100 years old. His wife Sarah—he's considered her barrenness, the text says. And then it says—let me read for you verse 20: “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God”—what was the promise? That they would have a kid. “But he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” That's a great line. Think about that. Abraham was going to glorify God—another way to say you're going to bless God, say good things about God—because he knew full well that even though I'm bringing very little to this, in this case—as the text says earlier—“though my body is as good as dead,” I'm going to give thanks to God, glorify God, and praise God in advance for what I know he has promised he's going to do.

What about a New Testament equivalent to that in terms of the big picture of our future? 1 Peter chapter 1, verses 4 through 6, which talks about our inheritance—our coming inheritance. It's reserved, kept in heaven, and we're guarded by faith; we're going to get there. And it says, after saying all that about our inheritance: “In this you rejoice”—in what? In the fact that you have an inheritance that's undefiled, unfading, reserved in heaven for you. You're kept by the power of God—it's coming. “So in this you rejoice,” even though now it doesn't feel like we're heading there, even though now, it says, “if necessary for a little while you have been grieved by various trials.” So it doesn't look real good right now, but I'm going to thank God for what he's promised and where we're headed.

I always think of Isaiah 65 when I read that passage, because in the Old Testament we have a parallel: Isaiah 65, verses 17 and 18. God the Father talks about the coming eschatological plan, and he says to Israel, as they're about to go into captivity to Babylon, “Hey, listen, I'm going to create a new heavens and a new earth.” And the new heavens and the new earth are going to be great; the former things won't even be remembered. That's going to be such a wonderful place. And then he says this in verse 18: “Be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create.” Think about that. You want me to rejoice now, even though I'm being hauled off into Babylon, because of the promise of what you're going to do?



Now again, you've got to be careful about this. Remember the story I told you of Jonathan at Michmash? Are we talking about the cave of the pomegranate? That's where he was—Jonathan with his armor bearer. And he knew he was outnumbered by the Philistines, and the Philistines were twenty to one. And he says, "Listen, let's just go out there—this is the right thing to do. And I'm sure we should be out there fighting for the homeland and for Israel. So let's go." And then he makes this statement—this is 1 Samuel 14:6: he said, "It may be that the LORD will work for us, because nothing can hinder the LORD from saving by many or by few." Now, do you see the difference in that statement? And I pointed it out last time we read it. And that is that he's saying, "Maybe then we'll do this, but I think this is the right thing. I'm going to be faithful. I'm going to move ahead. And let's just state it up front, our confident assertion that God is able to do it whether we have a food truck or a box lunch. I know he can get the job done." That's the kind of confidence that thanks God ahead of time with a deference—as James 4 says, I don't want to be saying, "Tomorrow I'm going to do this, this, and that." I don't know. I don't know what tomorrow holds. I'm a vapor. I could be here and gone tomorrow. But I'm going to say, "If the Lord wills," and that'll give me some great confidence in moving forward with this.

By the way, a chapter earlier James made it very clear some of the reasons we don't get the things we ask for. He says, "You ask and you don't receive because you ask with wrong"—what?—"motives, so that you can spend the things you get on your pleasures." And I know the prosperity-gospel people take this idea and they're talking about the boat in the harbor or your big five-million-dollar RV or whatever they're talking about you getting—and you thank God in advance for it, then it happens. That's not what I'm talking about. Is it clear? I'm not talking about that.

But when you know there are certain things—let's talk about our situation, Project 2014—we know this: God has promised, Matthew 16, he's going to build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Now, that's no promise for any particular piece of property or anything; I get that. But I do know God wants his church—if it is biblically grounded and on the truth and the profession of who Christ is—he's going to build the church even in the darkest times, and even hell itself cannot prevail against the church. So with that in mind, I can be grateful in advance—whether we get this property, don't get this property—God is going to supply for his church. I can be sure of that. I can thank him in advance when I'm having all of the emotional gymnastics about the future of our church.

Or how about in your personal life? Here's a great passage: 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 13. "No temptation has overtaken you except that which is common to man. God is faithful—[he] will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you're able. With the temptation, he's going to provide a way of escape so that you may be able to endure it." Think of that one promise right there as you think about the challenges you face. God is never going to put me in the pressure cooker that is so hot or so hard that



there is not a way for me to endure it. I can thank him in advance for the challenges that I'm facing. I know this: it's not going to crush me. I know that God has provided a way, and he's given me all the resources, including his Word and his Spirit, for me to get through this the way I ought to. I'm going to thank him in advance for that.

It takes a lot of faith—to welcome the challenge, personally meet the need, get involved, and thank God in advance. But it is crucial for us. It takes faith, I get it. I might make you look up—if you're doing the questions on the back this week—Hebrews 11: "What more shall I say? Time is going to fail me of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, all the prophets"—I'd have to go through that; it'd take me forever. But it says these people, and many more, "through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of the fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, and put foreign armies to flight." If we don't have faith, we will retreat in timidity. We will never step up to spend and be expended. I assure you, we won't be in any list like that. You've got to be gutsy enough, trusting God enough, to accept the challenge—welcome it like Christ did—say, "I will get involved. I know I'm under-clubbed for it. I get that. But I'm going to thank God in advance for what he can do through us."

And I'd be remiss if I didn't quote—often through this whole provision series—that great line from Ephesians chapter 3: that God is able to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine—you know that—through the power that works mightily within us. I know we're all under-clubbed for what God has called us to do, and the challenges before us seem too large. But let's trust what God can do through the smallest of resources.

Why don't you stand with me, and I'll let you go with a word of prayer.

God, we stand at the end of this sermon in a very familiar passage, remembering that you could take a boy's lunch and multiply that to meet expansive needs. And it wasn't like these people were dying of hunger. It wasn't like there wasn't another solution. But you wanted to impress the disciples that when they were met with a need—a challenge—something always lying before them, providentially, as a task that looked big—bigger than them—you wanted them to always remember the day that Christ put his finger in their chest and said, "You give them something to eat."

God, I know there are a lot of reasons for us to pass by the need—whether it's in the bulletin or something we learn about in our small groups, or something we see at work or in our culture. But let us



be more apt to see that as a providential opportunity—to be more ready and willing to welcome that as a challenge that we'll personally get involved in, always knowing that you're a God that has promised a number of things in your Word that we can thank you for ahead of time. It may feel a lot like holding up a sack lunch and thanking you for something that seems far too inadequate to meet the need. But give us more faith to recognize that you are capable to do far more than we could ever ask or imagine. Thank you for that strength that mightily works within us.

We look forward to looking back one day and seeing the things that you've accomplished through these people as they take passages like this and put it to practice in their lives. Make us doers of the Word this week. I pray in Jesus' name, amen. Amen.