

# HOW MUCH BREAD DO YOU HAVE?

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## Great Questions (Part 4)

Text: Matthew 15:29-39

### I

The Bible says that : **“Jesus left”** the region of Tyre and Sidon, traveled east] **“and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.”** So palpable was the life-restoring presence of God in their midst that the crowd stayed there for three whole days, till they had apparently exhausted all of the food they’d brought out with them.

It was then that **“Jesus called his disciples to him and said, ‘I have compassion for these people.’”** Now, it’s very important to understand what the Bible is telling us about Jesus here. When we hear the word “compassion” we tend to think of a feeling, don’t we? Compassion is a warm feeling we have in our hearts for people, as in: “I’m so sorry you’re hungry.” The Greek word used to describe Christ’s compassion, however, is the word “splanchnizomai,” and it is nowhere near as mild or detached. It comes from the root word “splanchna” which literally means “intestines” or “guts.” To have splanchnizomai means to be filled with such gut-wrenching concern for another person that you become absolutely committed to doing something to help them.

Splanchnizomai is the word that gets used to describe what the Good Samaritan felt when he saw the beaten-up man in the ditch along the road to Jericho and was moved to pick him up and nurse him back to health, even though Samaritans and Jews were enemies. Splanchnizomai is the word that gets used in Jesus’ Parable of the Unforgiving Servant to describe what the Master felt when he heard his debtor, pleading for mercy, and was moved to forgive the debt, even though the amount owed was colossal.

The word, splanchnizomai, is used twelve times in the New Testament. In each case it is used to describe what God feels in his gut when confronted by a need that moves him into radical action. Splanchnizomai is love rolling up its sleeves. It is what drove Jesus to leave heaven and become a human being and lay himself down on a cross to rescue people who could not rescue themselves from the penalty of sin. Splanchnizomai is what leads Jesus to say to his disciples here: **“[These people] have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I don’t want to send them away hungry.”** I’m concerned that if I do, **“they may collapse on the way.”** The clear and unstated message is: “We can’t ignore this need, guys. We’ve got to move into action.”

And, like that scene in the boat we studied last week, the disciples look at Jesus in shock and say: *"You've got to be kidding, Lord."* "Did we miss the McDonald's or the Costco on our way up this hill?" "Is there a lunch-wagon you saw pulling up behind some bush in this food-forsaken wilderness?" "OK, we admit we're all so dag-blasted delirious from hunger, Jesus, that maybe it only LOOKS like there are four or five thousand mouths to feed here. Help us see what you're seeing, Lord. **"His disciples answered, 'Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?'"** To which Jesus replies with another one of those maddening answers in the form of a question: **"How many loaves do you have?"** Jesus asks. **"Seven," they replied, 'and a few small fish.'**" Emphasis on "small."

## II

We've *been* in this sort of conversation with Christ, haven't we? Many of us have gotten close enough to Jesus to know that compassionate action is one of his signature themes. We hear him say that we are to go out of our way to care for "the least of these" and to resolve the broken or careless relationships that define too much of life. We've heard his teaching about working to establish his kingdom's values in our society and making sacrifices to express his love. We have seen Jesus model this compassionate way of living and we actually admire this. In our best moments, we even aspire to this.

But, then, we look again at the hillside crowded with such aching need. We shake our heads at all the growling stomachs and groaning hearts in those disaster-ravaged parts of our world. We consider the huge problems in our economic and political system. We gaze in helpless stupefaction at the layer upon layer of ill-will and hurt that have mounted up in some of our families or workplaces. We look at the chasm between races and cultures. We see the urban poor, the broken families, the bad schools, the cycle of crime and incarceration. We feel so overwhelmed and wearied by the massive needs on the hillsides of life.

What makes matters worse is that WE are hungry ourselves. For some of us it is actual bodily hunger – for food or physical affection, for healing or rest. We're hungry in other ways too. We've fed voraciously on what this world offers to fill the soul. We've tried the entertainments and addictions, the dalliances and the diatribes, the prideful politics and shallow pieties this world is constantly serving up. But these dishes have not satisfied us. We may not be ready to spend three solid days at the feet of Jesus like that original crowd of thousands was, but like them we are here, listening today, because we are hungry for something more than we've found elsewhere.

That's why, when Jesus asks, **"How many loaves do you have?"** it is such a GREAT QUESTION. It is one of those deep and searching questions that gets at the heart of our condition. Like the first disciples before us, we stammer for an answer. We admit we have this little bit here – a few loaves of bread, a handful of sardines. But, underneath our breath, what we really say is: *"Not enough.* We don't have nearly enough in our

satchels to feed this whole hillside of need. Heck, we don't have enough to satisfy even our own souls. C'mon, Jesus, **where could we get enough bread to feed such a crowd?"**

The assumption here, of course, is that if these large needs are going to be addressed, the resources are going to have to come from someplace outside of us. As I'll say more in a minute, this is partly true. But it is also partly false, which is why Jesus doesn't ask: "How much food can those people rummage up out there?" or "How much can the government supply?" but "*How much bread do YOU have?*" my disciples. The disciples had to admit that they at least had *something* to offer – and even though it wasn't enough, they put it into Jesus' hands.

### III

The Bible says that then, **"[Jesus] told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish and, when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was four thousand,"** and more than five, including **"women and children."** Wow.

There is an interesting theory about how the crowd got fed that day. Some scholars suggest by starting to share with them the little bit of food that he and the disciples had, Christ ultimately inspired many people in the crowd to take out the remaining food they'd been hiding in their cloaks and start breaking it and sharing it with those around them. I personally believe something even more super-natural happened here, but the point of that first theory is well-taken. Is it really true that we don't have enough resources to address the needs of the hillside?

Do you realize that if we took just one-quarter of the \$450 billion that Americans spend on Christmas each year, and shared it differently, we could guarantee clean water for everyone on the planet and all the health improvements that come from it? Do you know that if every church in America adopted just one homeless person and one ex-offender, helping these persons to get on their feet, we could wipe out homelessness in our nation almost overnight and put a profound dent in criminal recidivism?

There is enough agricultural know-how, sufficient food, and enough capacity to transport goods today to end world hunger. There are sufficient resources available to immunize and educate every child, were the choice made to redirect monies and time now being spent on considerably less productive endeavors. If all the people who call themselves "Christians" simply elected to boycott (instead of tolerate or embrace) the humanity-degrading, morality-polluting streams that pass for "entertainment" today, we would not only likely see a dramatic improvement in human culture, we would free up billions of dollars that could be applied to security, health, and other common concerns.

As our own Rev. Tracey Bianchi points out in her new book, GREEN MAMA, each of us has the ability to make simple choices that would have a profoundly positive impact on our environment. You don't have to be a new-age tree-hugger to do this sort of thing. You just have to be somebody that believes God meant us to care for his Creation and that it would be good for our kids to inherit a world at least as clean as the one we did.

#### IV

The headline here is that it is simply not the case that humanity lacks the material resources required to help many of the people on life's hillsides. The principal issue confronting humanity today is that too few of us are willing to put what loaves and fishes we DO have into the hands of Jesus to serve the common good. I said earlier that it IS partly true that the answer lies outside of ourselves. But it is not the government. The people there are too busy groping and gaveling one another at present to be a lot of help. The answer to our world's biggest problems and opportunities lies in what happens when He who is the Bread of Life comes from the outside into the inside of a person and begins to fill that person with His life.

Jesus doesn't ask us to save the world. He doesn't even ask us to save ourselves. He actually says, you can do neither on your own strength. When Jesus asks, "*How much bread do you have?*" he is really asking, "How much of ME do you have?" How we answer that primary question is what determines how we handle our loaves and fishes. "You see, if you take ME into the center of your being," says Jesus, "I am going to give you my guts. I will make you a person of *splanchnizomai*." You will find that you CAN spare some encouragement, kindness, or grace to someone who needs it this week. You will find that you CAN extend hospitality to the stranger, patience to the slow-goer, prayer or comfort for the bereaved and anxious. You will discover that you CAN take some resources you'd planned for consumption and use them for compassion instead. You'll find that not only CAN you do these things, but that you actually feel MOVED to do them, that you have ENOUGH to do them, because the Bread of Life is filling you from the core.

So, "How much Bread DO YOU have?" If it's not enough, ask Him for more.

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## Great Questions (Part 4)

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1. What are some of the huge hungers that you see on the hillside of our world today?
2. When you look at these needs, do you typically feel...
  - Drained
  - Grieved
  - Worried
  - Non-plussed
  - Motivated
  - Something else...
3. Do you agree or disagree with the idea that we have enough resources to address many of the large needs of our world? Say more about what you believe about this and why.
4. If the compassion and mind of Christ truly filled up and directed the lives of most people in your family, church, town, workplace, or nation, what might change? Why?
5. Of the following needs in our world, which particularly stirs a compassionate concern in you?
  - People without clean water
  - People starving or malnourished
  - Homeless persons
  - Ex-offenders and their families
  - Sick people without medicine
  - People polluted by immoral influences
  - Illiterate or under-educated children
  - Something else...
6. What would you want to ask someone who didn't feel moved by any of these sorts of needs?