

The Man Who Bleeds Compassion (14:1-21)

Well good to see everybody this morning. If you've got a bible, turn with me to Matthew 14. Today we're hopping back into a long-running series our church has been in through the book of *Matthew*. If you're new, we actually *started* this series back in August of 2020. Do y'all remember August of 2020? Like back when we thought COVID would be over any day now? We've grown up so much since then haven't we? But anyway, my point is that we've been in this book for quite some time.

But as a refresher, the book of Matthew is one of four early biographies of Jesus we have in our bibles. And if you had to pick one "mega" theme of the book of Matthew, it would probably be what Jesus calls "the kingdom of heaven" (or the "kingdom of God"). That one idea comes up over and over again, throughout the entire book. And **the kingdom is Jesus' way of talking about the places and spaces in our world where, in his language, "God's will is done." It's where what God wants to happen, happens. Where life looks like what he says life should look like.** That's the kingdom of heaven. And during *most* of the book of Matthew, Jesus is trying to unpack and demonstrate for us what that kingdom looks like.

And today, we enter a new section of Matthew. Over the next two months or so, we'll be looking at chapters 14 through 17. In *these* chapters, we see people start to *understand* the kingdom (that's our subtitle for this section of the series). So far in the book, there's mostly been a lot of *confusion*. The *disciples* are confused, the *Pharisees* and *religious leaders* are confused, a lot of the crowds are confused—and then *everybody* is confused when Jesus speaks in parables. There is a lot of *confusion* going on about what exactly Jesus is saying. But in the section we'll cover the next *couple months*, some people start to get it.

Mainly the *disciples do* (the twelve guys that regularly followed Jesus around). And even for *them*, it's very much a two-steps-forward, one-step-back type of understanding. It's almost like you can see the gears turning in their brain in real-time—and then also getting *stuck* some of the time too. In fact, we *probably* could've named this section of Matthew, "The Disciples Being Geniuses and Idiots, All at the Same Time." But that was a little bit long and didn't fit on the bulletin. So we just called it *Understanding the Kingdom*. It's a rocky journey of discovery most of the time. But sometimes you have to celebrate the little victories, right? Every little bit counts. Sometimes that's what life with Jesus is all about.

So let's dive in this morning to this section of Matthew and see what we can glean from it ourselves. Pick it up with me in Matthew 14, starting in v. 1:

[1] At that time **Herod** the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus (so we're zooming out, panning over, and catching up on another part of the story for a second. "Herod heard the reports about Jesus...), [2] and he said to his attendants, "This is **John the Baptist** (which it wasn't); he has risen from the dead! (which he hadn't) **That is why** miraculous powers are at work in him." (which also wasn't true).

So *none* of that was actually accurate. But **Herod thinks that it is**. Because of everything Jesus is doing, Herod thinks Jesus is a resurrected version of John the Baptist. But just as soon as Matthew tells us all that, he needs to catch us up a little. Because the *last time* we heard from John the Baptist, back in ch. 11, he was still alive. So here's **the backstory**, v. 3:

[3] Now Herod had **arrested John** and bound him and put him in **prison** because of **Herodias**, his **brother Philip's wife**, [4] for John had been **saying** to him: "It is not lawful for you to have her." [5] Herod **wanted to kill** John, but he was **afraid of the people**, because they considered John a **prophet**. Now, here's where things kick up a notch. Verse 6... [6] On **Herod's birthday** the **daughter of Herodias** **danced** for the guests and pleased Herod **so much**— [7] that he promised with an **oath** to give her whatever she asked. [8] Prompted by her **mother**, she said, "Give me here on a platter the **head** of John the Baptist." [9] The king (Herod) was **distressed**, but because of his **oaths and his dinner guests**, he ordered that her request be granted [10] and **had John beheaded** in the prison. [11] His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother.

Okay. Let me **try to unpack all of this** as quickly as I can—because this is still just the *set-up* to our story about Jesus. But it's quite the set-up. So Herod Antipas was basically a *puppet* king set up by the Romans. He was the *son* of *another* King Herod who, if you know the Christmas story, had all baby boys in Bethlehem murdered because he saw them as a *threat* to his throne. So *this* Herod doesn't exactly come from great stock.

But **this Herod** was also **shady in his own right**. He had fallen in love with, seduced, and then married his *brother's wife*, a woman named Herodias. Which is frowned upon in *general*, but it also was a direct violation of Old Testament law. (Which—just as a side note—I know not everybody is a big fan of the Old Testament Law. But "don't sleep with your sister-in-law" sounds like a pretty good rule to me. Just my two cents.) But because it's against Old Testament Law, **John starts calling Herod out** publicly for it. So Herod has John thrown in prison to shut him up, as corrupt kings and rulers sometimes do.

Now, **while John is in prison**, Herod throws a **birthday party** for himself. But this birthday party is like nothing you and I have ever been a part of—or at least I hope not. Because at this party, the wine is flowing, guests are there having a good time, and then **a dance** gets performed. And from context, this isn't just *any* dance, but an *erotic* dance for Herod and his guests. And the performer is none other than Herodias' *daughter*. So track with me here: this is *Herod's step-daughter*, who is also his *niece*. Did you follow that genealogical math I just did? And to make things even *worse*, we think she would've been around 12-14 years old at the time. So this is whole new levels of depravity here.

And the passage tells us that this dance **"pleased Herod** so much" (read into that whatever you want, we're already too many levels down into gross for me to unpack it all), that he makes her a promise. He says he will **give her whatever she wants**. He's probably thinking that she's gonna ask for some money or some property or something like that, which is all very feasible for him. But instead, she plots with her mom to ask for John the Baptist's head on a platter. And at this moment in the story, I'd imagine *Herod* is thinking "I may have had too much to drink." But he's already made the promise, and he doesn't want to look weak in the eyes of his *guests*, so he grants her request. John the Baptist is killed. Quite the story.

That's the background of the story we're about to read. **Then**, v. 12:

[12] John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus.

Now, I want you to think about this moment **from Jesus' perspective** for a second. John the Baptist was Jesus' *cousin*, and likely one of his best friends from childhood. They quite literally knew each other from the womb.¹ And not just that, but John was also Jesus' ministry partner. *His* ministry paved the way for *Jesus'* ministry. And on top of all of *that*, no doubt Jesus sees in John's death a foreshadowing of his own death. Jesus knows that *he also* will soon be executed by the powers that be. In fact, *Herod* himself will have a hand in it. **Receiving this news about John was a heavy moment for Jesus, to say the very least.**

So when he hears it, **Jesus does what most people would do** when they receive heavy news: he takes some time to be *alone*. Or at least *tries* to. Take a look at what *happens*, v. 13:

¹ See Luke 1:41

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

Okay, **picture this scene** with me. Jesus, attempting to get a moment alone, gets on a boat and heads across the lake to a remote place. But as *he is sailing* across the lake, the crowds start *following him*, on foot, to the other side. Jesus is *actively trying* to get away from people, and the people are following him. Such that *when* he gets to where he's going, people are *already there* waiting on him. And not just *waiting* on him; *needing* things from him.

So **can you imagine**, for just a moment, how *deflating* that could've felt? Think of the last time you were just *exhausted*—absolutely worn out—and you just needed a moment to yourself. And then imagine that in that moment, not just *needy* people, but *crowds of needy people* follow you and all need something *from you*. If *I'm* Jesus, I'm thinking “really? Can't even get a moment alone after the news I just received?” // And yet, when this happens to Jesus, his response is not frustration or anger or even an eye-roll. His response is *compassion*. **When life cuts you and I, we often respond sinfully. Often that's when we're at our worst. When life cuts Jesus, though, he bleeds compassion.**

But even with that said, **do me a favor here.** Let's **not do the thing** where we go “of course he showed them compassion—it's *Jesus*. Compassion is like his *thing*.” You're right, *it is* his thing. But we can't read this passage that *simply* for at least two reasons. *One*, because that ignores the entire context of the passage. It completely forgets the long, drawn-out story Matthew just told us about John the Baptist, and how Jesus is delivered that news and wants to be alone. Matthew seems to be *telling us something* about the headspace Jesus is in when all of this happens with the crowds. We'd be wise not to ignore that context.

But second, we shouldn't read it that way because that **isn't a theologically robust way** to think about Jesus. Here's why: Our theology—historic, orthodox, Christian theology—tells us that Jesus is *both* “fully God, *and* fully man.”² Not God dressed up in a human suit, not God pretending to *be* a human. But *fully God, and* fully man. Which means, among other things, that **Jesus experienced the full range of human emotion**. We read in the bible that Jesus *feels* deeply. He *grieves*. He *weeps*. He feels *joy*, he feels *compassion*. He gets *angry*. He gets *frustrated*. He experiences *all* of that. Now, unlike *us*, he

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (InterVarsity and Zondervan Publishing, 1994), p. 556.

experiences all of that in a way that is unstained by *sin*—but he still *experiences* it. Does that make sense?

So when it says that Jesus saw the crowds and “had compassion on them,” it doesn’t mean he used his divine robot powers to do that. It doesn’t mean that he pressed his “automatic compassion” button. It means **he had to figure out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, how to minister to people in the midst of a heavy, emotionally overwhelming moment**—much the same way *you and I* would. **He had to rely on God’s help to get to a place where he could care well for others, even while he was hurting and grieving and overwhelmed.**³ And that’s precisely what he did. **Out of a place of intentional, chosen compassion for these people, he begins healing all those who are brought to him in that moment.**

And it’s that *setting* that becomes the backdrop for one of Jesus’ most well-known miracles—one that is recorded in all four gospels: the so-called “feeding of the five thousand.” So let’s take a look at it, back in v. 15:

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

Now, several commentators note that the **disciples’ tone** towards Jesus seems a little *off* here. They don’t use any of their usual respectful *titles* for Jesus like “Lord” or “Rabbi.” They’re *short* with him. They’re a little *rude*. They’re *unusually direct and bossy* with him. It comes across almost like they’re *chiding* Jesus for not thinking about how these people would need food. “Hey, Jesus—what are you doing? Send these people away so they can eat.” Verse 16:

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

I love this. “**Tell you what guys what**—since I’m over here *healing* thousands of people...do you think y’all could maybe handle the catering?” Okay, Jesus didn’t say it *snarky* like that—that was the Kent Bateman translation of the bible. But he is pretty *direct* with them, right? He says plainly, “they *don’t need* to go away. *You* give them something to eat.” The disciples respond, v. 17:

[17] “**We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,**” they answered.

³ For more on why we can use “overwhelmed” as a description of Jesus’ experience, see Matthew 26:36-38.

So this is obviously **nowhere near enough** for the number of people present. The disciples have *five* loaves of bread, and *two* fish. The fish could've been medium in size, but the loaves were likely the size of small buns. So they have enough to feed one person, or maybe a small family. Jesus is asking them to provide for thousands of people with a few people's dinner rations. So they respond to Jesus incredulously: "Jesus—we have five loaves and two fish. What are you *talking* about right now? This isn't enough."

Famous last words. Look at v. 18:

*[18] "Bring them here to me," [Jesus] said. [19] And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he **gave them to the disciples**, and the **disciples** gave them to the **people**. [20] They all ate and were satisfied, **and** the **disciples** picked up **twelve basketfuls** of broken pieces that were **left over**. [21] The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children* (so likely upwards of 10,000 people in total)

Jesus miraculously provides food for this *huge* crowd. Such that it says every person was *satisfied*—they were *full*. And *then still*, there were twelve *baskets* full of food left over. I.e. just the right amount for the disciples themselves to eat. Which is no small thing, considering they were probably all a bit anxious about what *they* were going to eat too. **Jesus offers compassion and provision, even out of a place of heaviness and exhaustion on his part.**

So **with the story unpacked** a little, let's take a step back and ask ourselves what this story from Matthew might have to say to us—followers of Jesus, living in the 21st century, in Knoxville, TN. Other than it being an amazing story worthy of marveling *at*, what might it *mean* for you and for me? I'll give you *three* takeaways that stuck out to me. First...

Jesus Knows

The first thing that stands out to me is this: **Jesus knows how it feels to serve and care for others out of a place of grief, sorrow, and exhaustion.** These crowds *find* Jesus—and more like just *track him down*—right as he is still reeling from the news about his friend and cousin John. In fact, reeling to the point that he was *attempting* to get a moment alone. Which means Jesus is given this opportunity to serve and help others, out of a difficult physical and emotional state.

And I think that's important to notice, because **anyone who has followed Jesus for very long** has been in a place like this. **Especially if you believe, like the Scriptures teach, that part of following Jesus is regularly pouring yourself out to serve and care for others.** And I know so many of you, right now, are doing just that. **You're caring for a friend who is going through something. Maybe you're caring for a family member—a child or a parent, or a relative—maybe one who doesn't know Jesus, and you're doing your best to show them who he is. Maybe you're a LifeGroup leader, regularly thinking through how to love and care for the people in your group. Maybe you're just in a LifeGroup and trying to care for others.** I know so many of you are doing precisely this right now, day-in and day-out.

And *if* that type of thing is a regular enough part of your life, **sooner or later**, you're going to have to do it out of a difficult place. Out of a place of *exhaustion*. A place of *burnout*. A place of *I-just-don't-want-to-be-around-people-right-now*. Those moments *will* happen. You'll need to care for others while *you* are still reeling from devastating news of your own. You'll have to care for others while *you* are grieving. While *you* are exhausted. Or maybe just in seasons where life has worn you down. And there's **all types of advice** I could give you for those moments. **But can I just encourage you to do one thing, in those moments, above all else? Take those moments, directly, to Jesus. He knows how that feels. He has been in that place and knows it all first-hand. And therefore he is the best and the safest person in the world to talk to about it.**

About **two years into starting City Church**, I got the **phone call** that no pastor ever wants to get. It was the middle of the night, and one of our members had just been rushed to the hospital. He had collapsed on his driveway after having trouble breathing. And once they got him there, there was really nothing they could do. He passed away, at just 31 years old, leaving behind his wife and one month old baby boy. His name was Sean. Sean was deeply integrated into the life of our church. He was one of the 25 people that moved here from South Carolina with us to *start* City Church. We had even talked some about his desire to be a pastor of our church family one day.

So when he suddenly passed away, there were **two things I had to do**. One, I had to *grieve*. I had known Sean for a long time; we were friends. So on one level, I needed to *grieve*. I needed to *process*. But I also, as a *pastor*, needed to help 30+ people in our church who *knew Sean* *grieve* and *process*. I needed to help figure out a way to meet the practical needs of his wife and one month old. We needed to figure out funeral arrangements and details. I needed to care for others out of a really difficult place myself. **The months following his death were some of the most overwhelming and exhausting months of my entire life, without a doubt.**

But at the same time, there was a level of dependence on the Spirit of God in those months that I don't know that I've ever experienced, *before* or *since*. I remember thinking of passages like the one we're looking at today and just *asking* Jesus, out of a place of pure *desperation*: "how did you do it? How did you care for others when you had nothing in you to give? How did you serve other people in a moment like this?" In that season of my life, I think I was more aware of my need for the Spirit's help, than at any other time.

And out of that place came a *deep intimacy with God* as well. There was a keen awareness that Jesus *knew* some version of what I was feeling. That he had been where I was. And that he was incredibly *near* to me in the midst of it all. There was this understanding in me that Jesus had been where I had been, and felt what I felt. And that because of that, he was a trustworthy person to lean on and talk to in those moments. And I wonder if that's not some of what the Spirit invites us into in those seasons. In those moments when we feel like we have nothing left to give, and yet still *need to give*, I wonder if he's not inviting us into a type of desperation and intimacy that we might not *know* any other way. *Hebrews 4* says *this*:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted (that word can also be translated "tried." *Tested. Put through the fire...*) *in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*⁴

Jesus *knows exhaustion*. And because of that, his throne is the best place in the world to bring your exhaustion *to*. ~~Do you hear that? Do you believe that? Okay. Second...~~

Jesus Challenges

Jesus also offers a *challenge* in this passage to the disciples. If you pay careful attention, there is *a contrast* I think *Matthew* wants us to see in this story. The contrast is between the posture of *Jesus* towards the crowd, and the posture of the *disciples* towards the crowd. **Jesus sees the crowd with compassion, while the disciples see them as a burden.** So much of a burden, in fact, that the disciples approach Jesus and call his *attention* to the *burden* on his hands: "Jesus: all these people need to eat. You need to send them away." **Jesus responds with a challenge: "they don't need to go away. You give them something to eat."** Jesus challenges the disciples to see the **crowds the same way he sees them. As people in need of compassion; not simply as a burden.**

⁴ Hebrews 4:15-16

And I wonder if *that* challenge from Jesus needs to **make its way directly to some of us**. Because, just if I had to guess, there are likely people that *we* are inclined to view as *burdens*, too. Rather than *with compassion*. There are people—maybe even *groups* of people—that just *bother* us to no end. Who, when we see them, make us immediately feel more *tired* and *ornery* than we were before we saw them. People who wear us out and exhaust us. And listen: some of that is *understandable*. Some people’s personalities are such that they often annoy us. And I’m not trying to say that he can’t ever be frustrated when people are *frustrating*. So hear me on that.

But I **will say this**. It is very difficult to regularly treat someone with *compassion*, if you view them *primarily as a burden to your life*. It is very difficult to see your **coworkers** as people to love and serve—and also see them as horrible people who mainly only make your life harder. It is very difficult to see **your LifeGroup** as people God gave you to care for, *and also* see them primarily as annoyances to your life. Um, *parents* in the room: it is very difficult to regularly treat your kids with compassion and understanding, while viewing them mostly as needy, whiny, bothersome tiny humans. (With them it’s a little easier to do both, because they’re cute—but *still*, difficult.)

And I **could go on with examples**, but I think you get the point. It’s just extremely difficult to see people as logistical burdens and also be compassionately inclined toward them. So I wonder if part of what Jesus wants to accomplish, like he did with the disciples, is challenge us to see people the way *he* sees them. To care for people the way *he* cares for people. To see people through *his* lenses. I think that’s what Jesus is challenging *us* with as well. But **to pull that off**, we’re going to know one last thing. Which is that...

Jesus Provides

This one, I think, is **the most important** for us. **Wherever we’re at** on the other stuff—whether we are trying to love and care for people in a difficult season, or trying to see people with compassion rather than as burdens—we all need to understand, in those moments, that Jesus *provides*. We can obviously gather that from how Jesus *provides* for people in the story.

But I’ll tell you: there’s actually **more to this story** than first meets the eye. The way Matthew *tells* it, it’s clear that he wants us to see this story as a *re-telling of a story from the Old Testament*. The story of God providing manna in the wilderness. In Exodus 16, God has just led his people out of slavery in Egypt, and before they go very far at all, they start grumbling to him about not having enough food. So God starts providing *manna* (bread) for them. Literally raining bread down from the sky, each and every day, so that they have food to eat. It was a sign of God’s provision and trustworthiness. So

when *Jesus*, in *this* story, looks up towards the heavens and then breaks the bread, it's meant as an *allusion* to that Old Testament story.

But this story **doesn't just point backwards**—it also points *forward*. When Jesus thanks God, breaks the bread, and hands the food to the disciples, it reads almost identically to the story of the so-called **"last supper"**—Jesus' final meal with his disciples before his crucifixion. **Matthew 26** records that moment like this:

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."*⁵

Almost the exact same language as what we read in Matthew 14. But *this time* he adds something to it. He says "take and eat, this is my *body*." The bread that Jesus broke at *that later* meal was a symbol of his own body, that within 24 hours would itself be broken apart on the cross. **Jesus is saying, "not only do I provide—I am the provision."** Jesus is the provision for each and every one of his disciples, and for each and every one of us who would believe in him. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus wouldn't just *provide—he would become* the provision we all need. Paul makes **this connection even clearer** in **Romans 8:32**:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

If ever we **find ourselves struggling to trust** in God's provision for us, Paul says the best place to look is at the *cross*. If there, God didn't even *spare his own son*, but gave *him up* for us, can't he also be trusted to provide what we *need*? At the cross, we see that God is undeniably committed to providing for us. He is unbelievably devoted to making sure we have what we need. *Always*. // Now, let's **make sure we're clear on what is meant** by that. **That's not the same as saying God will always give us what we want. Or that God will always give us what we would prefer. Or even the same as him giving us what we think we need. But he will always give us what we need. And we can know that because of Jesus. Jesus provides, and he is the provision.**

But notice that in our story, Jesus' provision **isn't something** he wants his disciples to believe just **in theory**. He doesn't want them to believe that he is their *theoretical* provision. He wants them to actually *bank* on it. **He asks them to bring the only food they have or have access to, and offer it up for the crowds. Abandon it completely. He asks them to do what they would do if they knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Jesus**

⁵ See Matthew 26:26.

would provide. To do something that only makes sense if Jesus is who he says he is; if he can *do* what he says he can *do*. He wants them to know, first-hand, what him being *enough* feels like.

And **then, ironically, after they've abandoned** it all, there are precisely twelve baskets of food *left over* for them. Just the right amount for twelve disciples. **You see, math in the kingdom of God just works differently. The world's math says "take whatever you can get for yourself—and if you have some left over, maybe consider sharing it with others."** Math in the kingdom of God says **"give up everything you have for God and others—and when you do, there will always be enough for what you need."**

You see it's **one thing to believe** that God is enough for you in *theory*; it's one thing to read it in the bible, sing songs about it, say it to other people, post an Instagram photo of you reading about it in the bible. It's another thing to *know* that he's enough, in such a way that you're willing to live *as if he* is all that you need. So I just want to ask you a question, and I've got to trust the Spirit to help you answer it honestly: does your life reflect that Jesus is your provision?

In just a moment we're going to **take communion**. And as we say every week, that bread and that juice represents Jesus' body and blood. And I don't think it's any coincidence that Jesus wanted us to remember him and his death via a *meal*. When we take communion—when we *ingest* it into our bodies—we are physically acting out the reality that Jesus is our *sustenance*. He is our *provision*. He is what we need. So when we take the bread and the cup, *that's* what we're saying: "Jesus, *you* sustain me like bread. *You are* the manna that came down from heaven. And you are always enough for me."

God is **too good to let us believe** in his provision *theoretically*. He wants us to *know* it, see it, *feel* it. To live as if it is true. And when we do, he will always be enough.

Let's pray.