

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Give us peace, Lord God we pray. Peace within our hearts to praise You, peace within our lives to serve You, and peace within our souls to live for You. Save us from the distress and trouble of selfish living, and help us live a life of active, peaceful and faithful service. Thank You Lord Jesus, AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas\_** (Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)

Give thanks to God for His provision every time you eat or drink. This is a challenging discipline, but one that is worth the effort; God respond to our request for blessing, perhaps we need to do this more often!

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray for the future of your country.** Pray for those who have the health of your country in their hands. Health care is a political issue, whether we like it or not, and the way governments spend money is key to how healthcare is delivered.
- Praise God for His power to deliver from evil. Stand firm against the devil and all his works in whatever way seems most suitable for you.
- Pray for those parts of the world experiencing drought, especially Sudan

### Meditation

This is Your work O Lord our God,  
to give enduring love and purpose  
to a world that has lost its way;  
to shine Your light in the darkest of places  
so that all the people might see;  
to challenge all evil wherever it is found  
and confront it with love and truth;  
to overcome troubles, trials and distress  
with the beauty of harmony and peace;  
to offer healing and perfect wholeness  
to all who are ravaged by illness;  
to bind up what has been broken apart  
and give real hope to the despairing;  
to give back hope and confidence  
to those who struggle with life;  
to mend the broken in soul and spirit  
with the love of a Saviour who cares.  
Continue to do Your work, O Lord, for ever.

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## Bible Study

Bible passage – Matthew 15:29-39

<sup>29</sup> Jesus moved on from there, and returned to near the Sea of Galilee. He went up on the hillside and sat down. <sup>30</sup> Large crowds came to him, bringing with them those who were lame, blind, crippled and mute, and many others. They laid them at His feet, and He cured them, <sup>31</sup> so that the crowd was astonished when they saw the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking and the blind seeing; and they praised the God of Israel.

<sup>32</sup> Then Jesus gathered His disciples and said,

‘I feel deeply concerned for the crowd, as they have already been with me for three days and have had nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, in case they faint on the way.’

<sup>33</sup> The disciples said to Him,

‘Where in the desert can we find enough bread to satisfy a large crowd?’

<sup>34</sup> Jesus asked them,

‘How many loaves do you have?’

They said,

‘Seven, and a few small fish.’

<sup>35</sup> Then, as He directed the crowd to sit down on the ground, <sup>36</sup> He took the seven loaves and the fish; and after giving thanks He broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples passed them to the crowds. <sup>37</sup> All of them ate and had enough, and they took up seven baskets full of left over pieces.

<sup>38</sup> Those who had eaten were four thousand men, along with women and children. <sup>39</sup> When He had sent the crowds away, He got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

## Review

Today’s passage depicts two incidents in Jesus’ ministry similar to others in Matthew’s Gospel. Firstly, verses 29-31 describe Jesus’ general ministry to the sick (which is similar to 4:23-25, 8:16,17 and 14:34-36). Secondly, verses 32-39 describe the feeding of the four thousand (which is similar to the feeding of the five thousand; 14:13-21). Both these stories demonstrate Jesus’ compassion for the sick and those in need, and they illustrate the Gospel themes of Jesus’ provision for all people as God’s Messiah. However, there is a great deal more to them, and arguments have raged for centuries about why they appear to be repeats of similar previous stories. What more is revealed to us about Jesus through His feeding of the four thousand here in Matthew 15, that we did not discover in Matthew 14 when he fed the five thousand?

The simplest explanation that can be given is controversial, but if you bear with me while I explain, I hope you will be convinced that it is a helpful and reasonable explanation of these things. Put simply, this section of Matthew’s Gospel is in fact a description of Jesus’ ministry to the Gentiles, as opposed to His ministry to the Jews! Now why would I suggest this when Gentiles are not specifically mentioned in this passage? The reasons may be deduced from Jesus’ itinerary, the geography of Galilee, the reactions of the crowds to Jesus, and by cross checking this whole period of Jesus’ ministry with Mark’s Gospel (7:24-8:10).

Prior to today’s passage, Jesus had been journeying away from Galilee towards Tyre and Sidon (15:21), but at the beginning of our passage, He returns to Galilee (15:29), impressed with the faith of a Gentile (15:21-28). In those days, the Galilee region was heavily populated with both Jews and Gentiles; only a few towns were predominantly Jewish, mainly Capernaum and towns to the South and West of the Lake. Now Jesus could have returned there, but Mark (in his version of these stories) indicates that He returned to the Gentile cities of the Decapolis (Mark 7:31), which is a predominantly Gentile region around the lake.

If it is true that Jesus was ministering to Gentiles not Jews, then it would make sense of the crowd’s astonishment at Jesus’ ministry (15:31), for although the Jewish communities of Capernaum had seen Jesus ministry before (9:35f, 14:34-36.), they had not! This explanation also makes sense of the peculiar feature of this passage, where it says that the crowds ‘praised the God of Israel’ (15:31), a phrase found only here in the New Testament! Sometimes we read the Gospels as if details such as these are incidental. They are not! Sometimes, as here, they are essential to our understanding of Scripture!

In addition, Matthew records that before this incident, Jesus had been impressed by the faith of Canaanite woman, a Gentile (15:21-28). Jesus had just been rejected by the Pharisees (15:1,12-15), and the disciples had been slow to learn about faith (14:13). Perhaps Jesus was responding to the faith shown in Him by the Gentiles of Galilee, by ministering to them. Of course, Jesus wanted to minister to the Jews, but His

message, as Matthew always points out, is for all people; ultimately, he tells us that Jesus commissioned His disciples to take the Gospel to the whole world (28:19)!

Something else might also point towards this theory of Jesus' 'Gentile' mission here in Matthew 15, and this is the use of numbers in the feeding of the four thousand. Earlier, when Jesus fed the five thousand, the twelve basketfuls left over are generally taken to symbolise the new 'People of God', saved by Jesus' ministry. This would have meant something to the Jews who attended that even, but not Gentiles. But here, our story is now dominated by the numbers four and seven, both of which being important in the Gentile world. For example, the number four refers to the four 'corners' of the world and the number 'seven' was a perfect number, signifying Jesus' perfect ministry to the whole Gentile world. Now it is unlikely that we know all there is to know about the meaning of numbers in the first century AD, but there is enough here to reinforce our suspicions about the theme of this part of Matthew's Gospel.

After this passage, Jesus continued by focussing His ministry on the disciples. They would be the ones to take the Gospel to 'all the world' (28:19f.), so He took them away to Caesarea Philippi for a 'retreat' (16:13f.) with far reaching consequences. Our passage today concludes Jesus' general ministry to the crowds; they appear elsewhere, but never again as the object of His ministry.

## Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Further clues about whether this really was a Gentile ministry
- What was the significance of Jesus' healing ministry?
- What was the meaning of the feeding of the four thousand?
- How does the 'Gentile ministry' theory help us understand Matthew's Gospel?

### **Notes on the translation of the passage**

#### **V29 'returned to near the Sea of Galilee'**

Most translations say 'went along the Sea of Galilee', however, in the context of the whole story, Jesus had been going in the other direction (see 15:21f.). The Greek verb used here has a broad range of meaning, and 'return' is a perfectly acceptable translation as an alternative to 'went along'.

#### **V30 'mute'**

Note that the Greek word for 'mute' means both deaf and dumb. We separate the two today, but in ancient time when there were little by way of cures for such impairments, the two were usually suffered together.

#### **V31 'the mute speaking'**

Ancient texts of Matthew are divided, some have 'speaking', some have 'hearing', some have 'speaking and hearing!' In the light of the previous note about the meaning of the Greek word for 'mute', it is understandable that there was some early confusion (going back to the third and fourth century) about what exactly was meant here!

### **Further clues about whether this really was a Gentile ministry**

There are a number of other clues to the Gentile context for this ministry. The first of these is to do with the use of the term the 'Sea of Galilee'. Although we are very familiar with the expression, this passage is one of only five occasions in the New Testament when the full name is used, and three of these are from the different Gospel stories of the feeding of either the four or the five thousand (here, Mark 7:31, and John 6:1). What we know as the 'Sea of Galilee' is usually called just 'the lake' or 'the sea', and certainly, Matthew usually used the term 'the lake' (e.g. 4:13, 8:18, 13:1 etc.). It is therefore possible that Matthew said 'Sea of Galilee' in this story to indicate something different about it to his readers.

We have seen (above) that Galilee was a mixed region of Gentile and Jewish towns, and despite our association of Galilee with Jesus and the Jewish communities around the sea, it was a predominantly Gentile region. Jesus would have known the whole area well, having been brought up there, and he would have known exactly where to go to meet different people who normally did not associate with each other. It is well known that the Jews and the Gentiles of the region hardly had anything to do with each other, and it is remarkable that Jesus sought to break down these entrenched barriers. One other indication of what Jesus was doing is the phrase 'having gone up on the hillside and sat down' (15:29), which is the same language used to describe the beginning of Jesus' preaching ministry and the 'Sermon on the Mount' (5:1). Yet again, it seems that the repetition of this phrase along with others suggests Jesus was ministering to a Gentile crowd for the first time, but this time by healing rather than teaching.

Lastly, the very last verse of the story mentions Jesus' travelling by boat to 'Magadan'. Some mystery surrounds exactly where this is, but the best suggestion is that Matthew mistakenly spelt the reasonably well known town of Magdalan which is a Jewish region of Galilee (hence the name Mary 'Magdalene', meaning 'Mary of Magdalan'). Why should it be worth recording Jesus' travel to a Jewish town unless He had been in Gentile territory?

### ***What was the significance of Jesus' healing ministry***

The sick were brought to Jesus by crowds of people around the Sea of Galilee, and they 'laid them at His feet' (15:30). This particular expression signifies an act of extraordinary reverential awe, and this is not found in any other description of people bringing the sick to Jesus. It is as though the Gentile people who did this regarded Jesus as a god, even though they did not fully understand what they were doing. The astonishment of the crowds and their praise of the 'the God of Israel' (15:31) was also the reaction of a Gentile crowd (see above), but yet again, this is in fact a quite different response to his healing than reported elsewhere by Matthew. You may be surprised to find that in the other instances of Jesus' healing ministry recorded by Matthew as happening in Jewish territory, no-one responded to what Jesus did by worshipping Him. This was probably because they would only worship God, of course, and although they followed Jesus hoping He was the Messiah, they certainly did not think of Him as God! Until the disciples began to realise that Jesus was the Son of God (see 16:16f.), no one in Israel worshipped Jesus as God, only Gentiles did this!

In addition to this, the title 'the God of Israel' (15:31) may seem ordinary to us, but when we look at it closely, we will find that it is used extensively in the Old Testament, but it is not used anywhere in the New Testament! Yet again, this is one of the indications that the crowd must surely have been Gentile.

The people brought the lame, blind, crippled and mute to Jesus. This list is very similar to other lists of the works of Jesus, but it is not the same. The only place in scripture where the same list is found is in Isaiah 35:5,6. This is a controversial prophecy of Isaiah's that is universal in nature and speaks about the fulfilment of God's plan for Zion. It tells us that in God's plan, all people and nations who accept the Lord and His Salvation find perfect peace and unity. I believe strongly that Isaiah's vision transcends the limitations of talking about the Jews as God's people. This is a complex issue in Isaiah which goes back to his call (Is 6), and his great prophecies of the Universal rule of God's King and Messiah (chapters 9 to 12) which climax not just with the return of the Jews (11:12) but the praises of 'His Name' among 'all the nations' (12:3-6). Again, even this points towards this passage as being a ministry to Gentiles, not Jews.

### ***What was the meaning of the feeding of the four thousand?***

As before, this incident appears initially to be very similar to the feeding of the five thousand people (14:13-21). The main differences between the previous story and this are firstly that the disciples seem to be more understanding of the situation, then there are seven loaves and a few fish instead of five loaves and two fish, and there are seven basketfuls left over instead of twelve as in the previous story. What is similar, if not identical, in both stories is Jesus' compassion for the crowd, the desert and hillside setting, the controlled and seated crowd, the 'eucharistic' pattern by which Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to the people via the disciples. Each of these is significant in its own way.

It is interesting to see that there are 7 loaves of bread in this incident, and 7 basketfuls left over, rather than 12 (standing for the tribes of Israel in the feeding of the five thousand). The number 7 was accepted in most cultures as a 'perfect' number, and was the number of 'deacons' appointed in the early church (Acts 6:1-6). The number 7 was used widely, and most significantly, the Jews certainly used it to indicate 'all the nations of the world'. In addition, it is thought that the number four thousand was significant. There is strong evidence that 'a thousand' was a colloquial way of saying 'a very large number of ...' (Job 42:12, Psalm 84:10, Rev 20:2-7) and also that 'four' represented the four corners of the known world (Isaiah 11:12, Ezekiel 7:2, Rev 7:1). Putting all this together, the number of those fed, being four thousand, therefore represented a gathering of all the nations of the world, that is, both Jews and Gentiles!

### ***How does the 'Gentile ministry' theory help us understand Matthew's Gospel?***

Many would say that the idea that the two stories in our text are representative of Jesus' ministry to the Gentiles is circumstantial and inconclusive. However, I feel it is the best explanation, and without it, we are left with Matthew's Gospel as being a rather badly concocted set of stories of Jesus with either little rationale or some other more devious structure that is not yet fully understood. Certainly, if you read Mark's Gospel, the whole story fits quite conclusively in a Gentile context, and as most scholars reckon that Matthew used Mark's Gospel when writing his; this makes it even more likely that He was aware of the Gentile ministry. These were real events, and they certainly had a meaning for Matthew. He did not record them twice without reason. In the general story of the Gospel of Matthew, we are approaching critical times in Jesus' ministry, and there was no time for 'repeats'. The ministry to the sick here in chapter 15 and the feeding of the four

thousand tell us that God's purposes in Christ are universal. They may start with the people of Israel, but they are intended for all, if they choose to see it.

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## Discipleship

### Application

In this whole study, we have not questioned the reality of these events. We have simply sought to interpret them and discover their purpose. Even with this explanation, some people doubt that there were two events when Jesus fed large numbers of people, however, Jesus Himself spoke of the importance of both events later on (16:5-12). In this later text, Jesus upbraids the disciples for not perceiving the significance of what He had done by ministering to both Jews and Gentiles, and also for not understanding the terrible consequences of the Pharisees hypocrisy in the midst of the Jewish nation. Jesus was horrified that His own people, the people of God, were constantly rejecting both God and Himself as His Messiah.

The connection of this passage with Isaiah is extremely important. Isaiah's prophecies are some of the most powerful and inspirational writings of scripture, and they speak mostly of the end of God's rule amongst His own people and the beginning of the new rule of His 'servant', who we now know to be Jesus. Along with the healing of sickness (Is 35:5,6), Isaiah also prophesied a great banquet of God at which He would call all His people to Himself (Is 26:6). This is a prophecy that Jesus alluded to in His own ministry (e.g. Matt 22:1-13, the 'parable of the wedding banquet') and illustrated by feeding thousands of people in the miraculous circumstances described in our passage today. The two events in our passage today are connected by the prophecies of Isaiah, and they speak of God's end times when there will be no Jew or Gentile, and God will judge all people and recreate His world. This is no 'side-track' to our beliefs as Christians, it is our destiny and the unity of all God's people in Him is the great future to which we all aspire.

Lastly, the symbolism of 'taking', 'blessing', 'breaking', 'sharing', within the feeding of the five and the four thousand is a fourfold celebration which has unified Christians for two thousand years around the death and resurrection of Jesus. We know these actions constitute the focal point of the 'Lord's Supper', a meal of thanksgiving that celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and symbolises our entire faith. Everything in our passage today points towards the future not just of Jesus' own life or Matthew's Gospel in general, but towards the future of all things; and also of our ultimate destiny in Him. All of us must surely look forward to the time when Jesus comes in glory and reigns supreme, drawing all His people, Jew and Gentile, together in Him. If our worship and our service fail to reflect this great hope in Christ, then we have surely strayed from the Gospel path.

### Questions for groups

1. What does this passage say to us about the healing ministry of Jesus? Is the feeding of the four thousand a miracle of healing (in which the focus of the miracle is in the needs of people), or a 'nature' miracle (in which the focus is on God's power over the forces of this world)?
2. Read some of the references to Isaiah mentioned in this study and check that you understand how they are used in Matthew's Gospel.
3. Discuss the meaning of the feeding of the four thousand and what it reveals about God's plans for His people and the world.

### Discipleship challenges

- *If you have access to other books about the Bible, read around this passage and see if the books you have help you explore the issue of a possible 'Gentile mission' in Matthew in any more depth. Pray about what you find.*
- *Are there boundaries in people's minds about to whom the Gospel may be preached and to whom it may not? Discuss with a friend or group why any such boundaries exist within people's minds and what can be done to overcome them.*

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## Final Prayer

Almighty God, Your wisdom reaches far beyond us. Teach us how to be wise, and make us wise enough to be taught; so that when we meet You face to face, we may be wise enough to call upon our Saviour, and know enough to confess our sin before the throne of grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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