

**Mark 6:31-56, The Apostles' Maiden Mission: Debrief**  
**31-44, A Lost Holiday**  
**June 15, 1996**  
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**A. Overview**

1. 1-11 is their preparation, including a demonstration in the Lord's own village of Nazareth, and verbal instruction.
2. 12-30 is their actual ministry.
3. 31-end (now) is supposed to be a retreat and debriefing, but ends up as a continuation of their work. This is focus of the boat ride, but the rest is preparation for it. Two main portions:
  - a) 31-44, The Feeding of the 5000 (this week). Out of 35 miracles performed by the Lord in the gospels, this is the only one that is mentioned in all four. So merits special attention.
  - b) 45-56, concluding miracles on the returning boat trip and arrival back in town.

**B. 31-32, The Proposal: A Holiday Picnic**

1. The Setting: The apostles have just returned from their maiden mission, 30.
  - a) Excited about what they have accomplished.
  - b) Perhaps discouraged over the news of the death of JB, which reached the Lord about the same time they did (cf. Matt. 14:12,13)
2. 31a, The Suggestion: a vacation.  
Four terms give us guidance about godly vacations:
  - a) "Apart." Get away from the crowds. Need some private space. (Perhaps why I find Disneyworld less than satisfactory.) Cf. "Take time to be holy." "Be still and know that I am God."
  - b) "Desert place," probably to achieve this isolation, but also the refreshment of nature. Cf. Gen. 2, the Lord's delight in gardens. "Desert" here does not mean sand and cactus (though that can be extremely beautiful), but simply a country area, which at this time of year would have been flush with grass from the winter rains.
  - c) "Rest." Suggested by the Lord; not a bad thing to do. Cf. our discussion of the Sabbath. God does not intend us to work round the clock.
  - d) "A while." In Gk, "a little." God's pattern is that rest should be "little" in proportion to work; not lacking, but neither dominating. Contrast the idle excesses of the renaissance court, or the modern notion of retirement, neither

of which have sanction in the Bible. We are to labor and eat our own bread; we are to "rest a while."

3. 31b, The Reasons: Twofold

These provide the outline for the sequel.

a) "Many coming and going." Not just the crowd, but the disorder and tumult. In the town, people would stop by for a moment. Cf. US News issue on abuse of 911; imagine housewives with burnt fingers or tradespeople who had just hit their thumbs with hammers, running down to Peter's house to ask the Lord to mend their little boobos. Not conducive either to debriefing the apostles or teaching the multitudes.

b) "No leisure to eat." As a consequence of the confusion, the Lord and the twelve couldn't even sit down for a meal together.

4. 32, The Result: They set off "in the ship," probably the same that had relieved the press of the crowd in 4:1, 35, 36. Mark doesn't mention the location, but Luke 9:10 places it at Bethsaida, one of two towns by this name (house of fishes), probably just to east of where the Jordan enters the Sea of Galilee. If they left from Capernaum, it would be a straight voyage of little more than 4 km (2.5 miles), or more than three miles by land.

**C. 33-44, The Problems**

1. Two major vignettes, one corresponding to each of the motives for which they took the trip.

a) In each case, it seems at first glance as though the trip's purpose has been frustrated.

b) The Lord has promised them Rest. We should not think that he deceives them.

c) But plainly, the rest is of a different sort than they had anticipated. What are its characteristics? As we look deeper, we gain a clearer understanding of what Christian recreation is really all about.

2. 33-34, No Privacy.

Cf. the initial motive in 31, "There were many coming and going." They cannot escape the multitudes. People see the boat set out, recognize the Lord, and without knowing the destination, run along the shore hoping to intercept it when it lands.

a) The Multitude

1) 33, Their Eagerness

This multitude is different from the crowd in Capernaum. They are not just "coming and going," but are willing to

chase the boat, not knowing where it is going. This means dropping their day's labor, and in the event turns out to be a three-mile jog. They are serious about being with the Lord.

2) 34, Their Need

"They were as sheep not having a shepherd."

a> The expression comes from the OT.

1> Num 27:17. When the Lord tells Moses to prepare to depart this life, Moses asks that the Lord provide the children of Israel with a leader, "that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd." In response, the Lord appoints Joshua.

2> 1 Kings 22:17 and Chr //, Michaiah ben Imlah sees in a vision the death in battle of Ahab king of Israel, under the figure, "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have not a shepherd."

b> People are by nature a flocking creature, and need the oversight and direction of those so gifted by God. This need finds its NT reflection in the role of the "pastor," which simply means "shepherd."

c> This multitude had no shepherd. The Jewish priesthood and the rabbis should have been their shepherds, but we have seen already their hardness to the things of God, a problem that had been evident to Ezekiel (ch 34) 600 years earlier.

b) 34, The Lord's Response.

1) He does not plead fatigue, or insist on his holiday. His promise in Jer. 29:13 is true, "Ye shall seek me, and find [me], when ye shall search for me with all your heart." The casually curious may find he has set sail, but he never turns away those who seek him with all their heart, to the exclusion of everything else.

2) In fact, his compassion for them is such that he could hardly have enjoyed his picnic, seeing their need. Instead, he teaches them.

3) Note Mark's emphasis on teaching, though Matt and Luke mention healing as well. This is the main need, to which healing is secondary.

c) What about the Vacation?

1) In the city, "there were many coming and going," 31. People could stop in and out, returning to their homes; no common program. An hour's hike was another matter; he, not they,

now controlled the schedule. Benefit of a Bible conference. The rest was not in getting away from the people, but in providing a sense of order and discipline by eliminating the other distractions that made the ministry ineffective back in town.

2) Rest does not trump ministry to those who are truly hungry.

a> The trip filtered out the casual inquirers, but those who are willing to hike 3 miles will be received.

b> The Lord "was moved with compassion toward them," 34, and so could not have rested while they were suffering. If they feel their need strongly enough to follow him, he will not deny them.

3. 35-44, No Food.

Cf. the second motive in 31, "They had no leisure so much as to eat."

a) 36, The Problem

Actually, three:

1) The time: "The day was far spent," late afternoon, 3-6 PM. Luke 9:12, "the day began to wear away." It was approaching the time for the main meal of the day.

2) The place: "This is a desert place." No inns or public eateries; no McDonald's on the corner. They'll have to walk back three miles to get their supper.

3) The imposition: "Send them away." The disciples are getting impatient for their own picnic. That's why the Lord invited them here. It's all well to preach to some particularly zealous followers, but isn't it about time to get on with their own dinner?

b) 37-44, The Solution

Requires deliberate action on their part, together with a supernatural work of the Lord. Cf. Phil. 2:12, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of [his] good pleasure." It is true that our work is only possible as he works in us. It is also true that it is a real work, one that costs us, and to which we must discipline and exert ourselves.

1) 37-38, The Disciples' Part

The Lord places the burden back on the 12: "You give them to eat." The conversation highlights two possible objections they might have:

a> 37, the Quantity needed. At first they think he means

that they should buy the food for the multitude, later numbered at 5000 males, so perhaps as many as 20K. They estimate that this would cost 200 times a day's wage (and even that presumes they could feed 100 people on a day's wage!). (We learn that a penny was a day's wage in the parable of the vineyard, Matt 20:2ff.) This is unreasonable, because he cannot expect them as peasant fishermen to have so much cash on hand.

b> 38, the Source of the food. He corrects them by calling attention to the food they already have: five loaves and two fishes. This is almost certainly intended for their picnic supper.

1> One of the motives for their trip was to get some solitude so that they could eat. They certainly would have brought food along.

2> Objection: John 6:9 reports that this food was in the possession of "a lad."

a: The conventional view is that some kindly little boy in the crowd shared his lunch. But that would presume that the disciples either have none, which is unlikely, or hoard it, also unlikely.

b: Alternative: Zebedee can't run a fishing business alone. With his sons following the Lord around, he must find other help. The lad is one of his helpers, whom the 12 have brought along to "carry their bags," and who happens to be the custodian of their lunch.

c> Thus the Lord expects the disciples to share their own resources. Neither the ridiculously small amount they have available, nor fear for their own needs, should stand in their way.

## 2) 39-41, The Lord's Part

a> 39-40, He organizes the people for ease of distribution. 5000 males (44), probably representing family groups; lays them out in a rectangle of 50 rows and 100 columns, so that the disciples can pass easily up and down the aisles and make sure that everyone has what they need. *Application:* Nothing wrong with common-sense management and good organization in getting the work of the Lord done. In our desire to avoid the flesh, need to be careful not to lapse into carelessness.

b> 41, He divides the food in explicit dependence on God. We cannot expect the Lord to work if we seek to hide our dependence on him or deprive him of the glory that is his due.

3) 42-44, The Outcome

Not only was everyone fed, but there were twelve baskets of crumbs left, one for each apostle, to show that they really hadn't lost anything in sharing their lunch!

c) What about the promised Picnic?

The Disciples must share their picnic lunch, but it is returned to them manyfold in the twelve baskets. Clinging selfishly to our blessings will result in our inability to enjoy them, while sharing them with others will bring God's blessing. Cf. Prov. 11:24-26,

"There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth;  
and [there is] that withholdeth more than is meet, but  
[it tendeth] to poverty.

The liberal soul shall be made fat:  
and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.

He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him:  
but blessing [shall be] upon the head of him that  
selleth [it]."

D. **A look ahead ...**

Ultimate rest is in fellowship with God. Cf. the Lord's withdrawal to the mountain to pray; his time in the boat with the disciples.