

It Can't Be Done (Asking the Impossible)

John 6:1-15 (NIV)

¹ Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Festival was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

"You want the impossible!" When we say that something is impossible, do we mean that there is no possibility, no potential for this being done, or do we mean that it's highly unlikely or really hard to do? Are we talking the literal meaning or a hyperbolic, exaggerated meaning? Is it impossible or improbable? How about our Bible reading from John chapter 6: do the disciples find themselves in an impossible or an improbable situation?

Last week we heard that Jesus and his disciples went off to a quiet place to get some rest. While they did this, many people who saw them leaving ran after them because they had seen Jesus perform miracles like healing the sick. Jesus saw the large crowd, and "he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things." (Mark 6:34)

There was a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples before he began teaching the large crowd many things. That conversation is recorded here in John's Gospel account. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" (verse 5)

Now, you and I know how this story plays out, but for a moment I want you to put yourself in Philip's sandals. You have a crowd of 5,000 hungry men, probably 10,000 or more when you think about the women and children who came along. Someone turns to you and asks you as the local expert, "Hey, where are we going to get food for all these people?" What do you do?

Wheels start to turn in your head. You begin the mental calculations. You've done food for a graduation party or a family reunion or a wedding reception. You can multiple the amount needed based on these previous experiences. You recall the party planner's rule of thumb that you want about a pound of food for each adult served. If we are talking in terms of bread, you can get a loaf of the cheap stuff for about \$1 a pound, \$1 per loaf. Get the heartier bread per loaf for about \$2 for a pound and a half. 2-3 people per one loaf of that bread. Just for the men we are talking 2,000-ish loaves of bread, maybe 5,000-ish loaves of bread if we have the estimated 10,000+ people when counting the women and children. That's \$5,000 to \$10,000 to feed all these people! We got Jesus and his disciples. Most of these disciples are simple men, not men of great wealth or prestige. Do they even have that kind of cash at their disposal for one day of feeding hungry people? Probably not. If this were us, and maybe you are blessed to have an extra \$5,000 to \$10,000 to spend on one meal, would you even be able to acquire all that bread in a day, with no preparation, no scheduled order or delivery? You go to Fresh Market or Smith's and you could get a couple hundred loaves of bread, but 2,000 to 5,000 loaves? The disciples are not in a metropolitan area. They don't have supermarkets. They had no time to prep. The people did not bring picnic lunches with them, no dishes to pass for some super potluck style meal. You look at the situation, and wouldn't we give the same assessment as Philip? Philip answered Jesus, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" (verse 7) It can't be done, Jesus! This is impossible!

Did Jesus really ask Philip and, by proxy, all his disciples to do something that is impossible? Does God ever ask us to do the impossible? Some quickly answer this question saying that God would never command us to do something impossible, that he's not that cruel to tell us to do something that we can't do. Perfect example: Matthew 5:48 where Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Is God serious when he says this? Does he really expect and command us to be perfect? Well, I

can't be perfect. So, God must not mean that. He must mean that I should try really hard to be perfect, give every effort. Or maybe God means that I can become perfect in another life, something like that. That must be what he means because our God doesn't want or expect the impossible out of us.

Yet, there are some 100 or so verses from the Bible about being perfect or blameless before God. This is his expectation for us. This is his command. He says, "Be perfect." He doesn't say try to be perfect. He doesn't say become perfect. He says, "Be perfect." This means that for every second of every day of every year of your life, from beginning to end, you must be perfect all that time, never once slipping up, never once forgetting to do something, never once messing up – even if it's ignorantly. Perfect all the time including right now. Is that you?

No one's perfect. You're right. God himself says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) But that doesn't stop God from commanding and demanding constant perfection from us right now. God wants the impossible from us, just as he did when he asked Philip how they were going to buy enough bread for all these people to eat. It's like Luke Skywalker training with Yoda at Dagobah in the *Empire Strikes Back*. Yoda urges Luke to use the force to pull his X-wing out of the swamp waters. Luke tries and fails. Exhausted, he says, "It's just too big." After a lesson on size mattering not when it comes to the force, Luke walks away saying to Yoda, "You want the impossible."

God does indeed put impossible situations in our lives. He expects Philip to buy bread for 5,000 to 10,000 people without any prep work or sufficient funds to do so. He commands us and all people to be perfect, right here, right now, and always, but that's impossible for us. What impossible situations do you find in your life? A temptation that you can't overcome like an addiction to pornography or to drinking – that no matter how many times you tell yourself that you aren't doing this again, that you aren't going to that website, yet it happens one more time. Then one more time. One more click. One more drink. But God says resist! You don't. You can't. Maybe you find it impossible to be happy when you're always depressed, that the sadness never goes away but clings to you every day, that you just can't stop thinking about it. You've done the counseling. You've read the self-help books, but you are still sad, still not happy. But God says rejoice always. Be content in all circumstances. You want the impossible, God.

Yes, God gives us impossible situations. Why? When it came to asking Philip to feed the 5,000+, we are informed, "[Jesus] asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do." (verse 6) God already has the solution to impossible situation. He fed the 5,000+ with just five barley loaves. He gave the crowd so much food that they were all satisfied and there were 12 baskets of leftovers, one for each of the disciples to reinforce the lesson that God is the solution to their impossible problems.

We cannot be perfect as God commands and demands us to be. It's impossible...until we look to Jesus for the solution and see what he did. He was perfect. He kept all of God's laws every second of every day of every year of his whole life. He never once lapsed, never once failed, never once forget to do something out of ignorance. He was perfect all the time. He fulfilled God's command to be perfect. He is the solution to the impossible task of being perfect – not that he was our example of perfection, that we need to muster up enough tenacity and willpower to be perfect, but he himself is our perfection. He did it for us, in our place, as our substitute. He is the perfection that God demands of us. He is the Lord, our Righteousness, our solution to that impossible command from God.

God wants and expects the impossible from us. At the same time, though, he presents himself as our solution to the impossible situations that come into our lives. He was the solution to the impossible situation of feeding the 5,000+ people. He is our solution to the impossible command "Be perfect as God is perfect."

Knowing that our God does the impossible, what will you do with that knowledge? Will you be the Luke Skywalker who in wide-eyed wonder says after Yoda lifts the X-wing out of the swamp, "I don't believe it" and fail to look to the one who solves impossible situations? Will we resign ourselves to our addictions and say that we can't overcome them, that they are too strong, that this is impossible to resist, that our God is too small to solve this for us? Will we say that I can never be truly happy with this grief in my life, that it's impossible to overcome, that God does not give me joy greater than my grief? Will we say that God doesn't actually expect the impossible out of us?

No. We don't lower God's expectations or his commands of us. Instead, we see how he is so much greater than we ever thought. He expects the impossible, and he gives us the impossible. When he puts an impossible situation before us – food for 5,000; perfection; overcoming addiction; happiness in spite of sorrow - he is testing us to look to him for the solution to the impossible. He does what we can't do. He fed the 5,000+. He is our perfection that he demands. He is our strength to overcome addictions. He is joy even throughout all the grief. With the faith he gives us, we look to our God who does the impossible for us. Amen.