

IN DARK TIMES DO GOD'S WORK

Matthew 13:53-14:21

Key Verse: 14:16

“Jesus replied ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’”

We live in dark times. A few years ago, all anyone could think about was Osama Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda but now they are old news and ISIS is seemingly everywhere. Daily reports of terror all over the world seems to be the new norm and after ISIS, will come some other terror group, it is never ending. Our president threatened to completely destroy North Korea this week, which is only going to continue to escalate the constant threat of nuclear war. On top of this there is such a rising pressure for Christians to conform to the trend of society and let go of the fundamental values of the Bible. Those who refuse to adhere to what is PC are destroyed in the public arena. What is more, in many countries Christians are facing very real persecution, being shot, beheaded and imprisoned. Yet, our state department has historically been very slow to condemn such things or even recognize them.¹ There is also a growing trend of secularism which removes the authority of the Bible and makes true Biblical Christianity seem out-of-date. All these things are not random, Jesus told us all these things would happen. This is the spirit and power of Satan spreading darkness and unbelief everywhere.

Jesus was in such a dark time as this. There was a widespread, growing opposition to him and apathy toward his message. What is more, a righteous man John was beheaded for telling the truth of God in a nation that said they worshipped God and followed his laws, by a king who historically claimed to be a practicing Jew! In one sense, they were finally a godly nation, free of idol worship and dedicated to God for the first time in their history. But in reality, the faith of their nation was shallow and they did not stand on the truth—sounds a little too familiar. What did Jesus do in such times? What can we do in such times as these? We see that Jesus did the work of God with great compassion and he raised disciples. We don't need to be discouraged or dragged down into a fight with every dark trend of our time, we need to dedicate ourselves to spreading the kingdom, through telling the truth (14:4), showing compassion (14:14), and raising disciples (14:16,19). We'll look at this passage in two parts: first, the darkness of Jesus' times as we see through the rejection of his hometown people and the martyrdom

¹ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/431425/genocide-middle-eastern-christians-know-it-state-department-wont-say-it>

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of John, and second, through Jesus' compassion and feeding of the 5,000 what we should do in dark times.

First, the darkness of Jesus' times (13:53-14:11).

In verses 53-58 we find the account of Jesus' rejection by his hometown people. It's a sad account that shows how widespread the opposition to Jesus was. This comes at the end of the section of Matthew's gospel that has been showing us the growing opposition to Jesus (9:1-13:58): John and his disciples doubted that Jesus was the Messiah (9:14, 11:2-3), the towns where he preached were apathetic to his message (11:20-24), his own family did not believe in him (12:48-50). But most prominent is that the Pharisees had outright rejected Jesus (9:34) and begun to repeatedly oppose him (9:3, 11, 34, 10:25, 11:18-19, 12:2, 14, 24, 38) and were even plotting to kill him (12:14). Their stubborn refusal to see or hear had caused Jesus to switch from teaching plainly to teaching in parables, which was a pronouncement of judgment upon them, that the secrets of the kingdom would be hidden from them (13:11-13).

Verses 53-54 then say, **“When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. Coming to his hometown, he began teaching the people in their synagogue and they were amazed.”** At first the real reaction of his hometown people came out, **“They were amazed.”** They felt the Spirit's prompting, God drawing them to Jesus, they felt the amazing power of Jesus' teaching. That is the moment that they should have repented and believed the message. However, they quickly began to ask questions that quenched the Spirit's fire and led to disbelief. **“Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked** (54b). In fact they asked the question twice, **“Where then did this man get all these things? (56b)”** The answer to both questions was obvious: from God! Nicodemus, was a Pharisee and Sanhedrin member, he should have been the biggest skeptic of Jesus but he admitted, **“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”** Or again a poor blind man said, **“You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes...if this man were not from God, he could do nothing.”** (Jn 9:30b,33). Matthew has been building a continual theme that the people saw and heard everything but they continually made a wrong judgment about Jesus (11:20-24, 12:41-42). They said, **“Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?”** Verse 57 says, **“And they took offense at him.”** They basically said “Who do you think you are?”

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“But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home’” (57). Jesus reminded them that this had always been the pattern of Israel to look at prophets humanly and reject the message God was giving through them. They were like the thorny soil. They received the word of Jesus and they were amazed but then they let their human thinking choke out the fruit of repentance and belief. So often a person receives the word with great joy but then they begin to look at their Bible teacher or church leaders and say, “Where did they get these things? They don’t have any qualifications to teach the Bible, where is your degree and your ordination?” It’s highly unlikely, but perhaps some people might look at P. Ron and see one or two faults, or the elders or staff, or even their fellowship leader and then stop wanting to listen to them. But if we do this, we ignore that these people have been appointed by God, through the leading of the Spirit, after much prayer. If we only see them humanly and cannot respect their leadership, we reject God and his purpose through them. We have to be careful of looking at God’s servants from a merely human perspective. Because of their lack of faith Jesus did not do many miracles there (58).

This mounting darkness of Jesus’ times culminates in the account of the martyrdom of John the Baptist. In verses 3-12 we see that Herod and Herodias tried hard to silence the voice of truth through John, so they could escape their guilt and enjoy their life of sin. However, though they killed John, they could not silence his message. Even in those dark times, the light of Jesus’ ministry was shining so brightly that it reached the ears of Herod and convicted him of his sin, revealing his guilt. Chapter 14 verses 1-2 say, **“At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and said to his attendants, ‘This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work within him.’”** Herod reminds us of the servant in the story of “The Telltale Heart.” He had killed his master, the deed was done, and his tracks covered and there was no way to be discovered. But he could not escape the imagined, horrible sound of his master’s still beating heart, until it drove him mad with fear and guilt and he confessed. It’s a good image of how people try unsuccessfully to cover their sin.

The terrible tale goes that Herod and Herodias fell in love and both divorced their spouses to marry each other (3). When John told them it was unlawful, he was arrested but not killed because Herod feared public opinion (4-5). Herodias, wanting to silence the voice that convicted her of sin, trapped her husband by using her own daughter to seduce him with a dance (6-7). Herod was so pleased by the girl, that he promised her on oath to give her whatever she asked and prompted by

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her mother she asked for the head of John the Baptist (7-8). Herod was distressed needlessly, he wasn’t really bound by the oath but simply because of the pressure to save face in front of his guests, he gave in and ordered John beheaded in the prison.

According to verse 5, Herod feared repercussion from the public if he killed John but in fact nothing came of it as far as we know. It seems the darkness had won and John was a failure. Yet, John is the true hero in this account. Unlike Herod, John did not give in to the pressure of his times. He spoke the truth even though he knew it may cost him his life. Surprisingly absent from this story are the Pharisees. When we consider this account in the flow of the surrounding chapters, it’s really shocking that they went after Jesus’ young, inexperienced disciples for something as insignificant as picking heads of grain or hand washing but when their ruler publicly divorced his wife and committed adultery, without shame, they said nothing. When he murdered a righteous man to please a girl, they remained silent.

In our time too, there is such a strong push to accept what is clearly unlawful, or just be politically correct and remain silent. Those who will not go with the flow of our time will be destroyed in the public arena. Mozilla co-founder Brendan Eich stepped down as CEO just days after his appointment in 2014. He had given a \$1000 contribution to the campaign for Proposition 8, an amendment to the state constitution of California, that said, “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California.” As a result there was a firestorm on Twitter and a Firefox boycott by a number of companies and their own community, and he was forced out. It raised serious debate among even non-Christian people about how we are going too far to be politically correct and the reality of the lack of free speech in our times. What is ironic is that one politician said that even though 52% of California voters supported the amendment, everyone was too afraid of identifying as conservative because of what it will cost them.² We live in a time when making wrong remarks about controversial personal views on Facebook can cost you your job or keep you from being hired. We live in a free country with freedom of religion, expression and speech until you cross that line to criticizing that sin which society has deemed acceptable and then you will be beheaded—and there are many trophy heads on the wall. It creates an atmosphere of fear that makes everyone want to put their head down and just go

² <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/04/mozilla-ceo-resignation-free-speech/7328759/> ; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tonybradley/2014/04/05/backlash-against-brendan-eich-crossed-a-line/#750e8ebe6f8a>

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with the flow. We must never forget that first in the list of those going into the fiery lake in Revelation 21:8, are the cowardly.

However, John was not silent, he spoke the truth in dark times and gave his life heroically for God's glory. John has been known throughout history as the great forerunner of Jesus, a fire that burned bright and hot and could not be put out. Jesus said, **"Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist"** (11:11). When we meet him in heaven, he will be in the place of greatest honor as a martyr for the truth. May God help each of us to tell the truth in our generation with the same courageous, unbreakable spirit of John the Baptist.

Second, in dark times do God's work (12-21).

How did Jesus react to the darkness of his times? Verse 12-13a say, **"John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place."** We can see Jesus' ultimate purpose in going away to a solitary place, in verse 23. It was the same reason Jesus always withdrew to a solitary place, it was to pray (Mk 1:35, Lk 5:16). In the death of John, Jesus could see the growing darkness and foreshadow of his own death by the wicked people of his time to silence the truth. In such a time he needed to come to God to find new direction.

But what happened to his plan? Rest, mourning, prayer, *nope!* The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from the towns (13). **"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick"** (14) Me? I would have told them to come back tomorrow, I had a scheduled prayer meeting and I don't have time. But Jesus happily let them interrupt his schedule. Jesus needed time for himself but he always let people interrupt him when necessary. Now that I moved my office to the basement, with a big open window, I get the chance to talk with many people, listen, help, encourage, pray together and share one word. At first, I saw these as interruptions but people aren't interruptions, they are the whole point of the schedule God makes for me. Matthew must have been so impressed by this event. Mark and Luke say that Jesus taught them many things (Mk 6:34; Lk 9:11) but Matthew only says that he healed their sick. Surely, such a formerly selfish guy who only looked out for number one, was amazed at how selflessly Jesus began to serve and emphasized this. On the wall of my office I have 1 Corinthians 13:2 as a constant reminder to me as I work, and it's a good reminder for us all. That even if we have great faith and do great works,

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accomplishing great goals, if we don't have love and compassion for people, we're nothing, because we're not showing them Jesus.

Jesus' compassion poured out so much that he stayed with the people all day and **“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.’”** At first glance, we may think the disciples are being selfish, but when you think about it, they are really being logical and pretty responsible. They saw the need of the crowd, they took leadership and told Jesus how they should logically solve the problem. The problem was that they did not factor Jesus into their equation. **“Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away’** (16a). The solution to the problem was not to logically send them away, the solution was Jesus. What the disciples basically reasoned is, we see this very real pressing problem, we don't have the resources or ability to solve it so we should send them away to deal with it on their own in a place that is better equipped. However, Jesus says, everything you need to solve the problem is right here, **“They do not need to go away.”**

In doing God's work there are so many around us that have so many needs. We can look at their problems and feel helpless, thinking we don't have the resources or the skill to help them. We want to send them away and let them deal with their problem on their own somewhere better equipped. But in reality we do not need to send them away. Yes, they may need medication, a good counselor or lawyer, medical or psychiatric help, partnership with other ministries, or even rehab when necessary but what they really need more than anything is Jesus. Outside help may solve their immediate problem but a relationship with Jesus leads them to salvation and eternal life, nothing can be more important. We *can* feed them, they do not need to go away, we do not need to feel helpless, we have Jesus with us. We can pray and bring them to Jesus.

So Jesus says, **“You give them something to eat.”** Jesus laid responsibility for the crowd on his disciples rather than simply taking up their problem himself. Why? It is because it was a teachable moment, a chance to train his disciples. They wanted to help, they took leadership but they did it without faith. Jesus wanted them to take personal responsibility and grow. Sending people away may seem logical when we feel in over our head but if we don't take people's problems as our own we cannot grow in faith to be shepherds of God's flock. Parents understand this through their children. When a child has a problem, we feel distressed all the time, even worse than when we ourselves are in trouble, and we want to immediately find the solution to the problem. We own their problem

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because we love them. We must in the same way make God's flock our own children and take responsibility for them. Their problems are our problems—that is the heart of Jesus. Compassion literally means to “suffer with” to enter into their situation and bear it with them.

Still, it seemed impossible logically. One of the hallmarks of our ministry has always been the mentality to challenge any situation by faith. Sometimes, admit it, we can sit and talk and talk about what is possible and impossible, reasonable, legal, prudent, until everything becomes impossible. Jesus' disciples said, **“We have here *only five loaves of bread and two fish*”** (17) **“It's impossible!”** But Jesus said **“Bring them here to me”** (18). Jesus' disciples should not look at what is possible for them in their own power, but what is possible with Jesus. What God can do is never limited by the resources or ability of his servants. When we bring what little we have, God can do a miracle. That our church could go from such a small seed in war-torn Korea to sending missionaries all over the world was unthinkable but God did a miracle. That any of us could be changed from who we used to be, to who we are now is a miracle. That God helped many of us overcome addictions, fatalism, and a meaningless life is a miracle. All this is possible because disciples of Jesus offered their five loaves and two fish to him.

Jesus **“directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and 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. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children”** (19-21). Again, it is amazing that Jesus laid responsibility to feed the crowd on his disciples, **“You give them something to eat.”** They could barely lift their hands to bring what they had to Jesus. However, when they did, it was in fact Jesus who did everything and they only participated. The reason that we do not need to fear or doubt in doing God's work, is because it does not depend on us and our own ability. Actually, when we offer what little we have, Jesus does everything and we only participate. We only faithfully go and invite people, but God draws them to Jesus. We only share the word but the Spirit convicts their heart. We only give them the gospel and baptize them but it is Jesus who saves them. We only show the way but it is God who brings them home. We offer what we have and through us God can feed the souls of the whole world. It's a mystery. It is truly beautiful and terrible that God gives us so much responsibility to feed all the lost people of the world, but he does. He says to each one of us **“you give them something to eat.”**

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What can we do in dark times? Jesus wanted to pray, but it seems the answer came before the petition and he found direction to raise his disciples to know him better and feed the people by faith in him. In dark times we can tell the truth, show compassion and raise disciples. Romans 12:21 says, **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** It is so easy to get dragged down into the mire trying to fight every evil trend of society that Satan cooks up and just fight continually in human battles. But in dark times, a crowd of over 5,000 people hunted Jesus down in a remote place. And Jesus saw that the dark time is the best time to shine God's light. These are the best times to do God's work because people feel the need and will seek out an answer. May God help us to raise disciples in these dark times.