

Main Idea: In John 6:16-27 Jesus the Master Teacher used two different lesson plans to teach two different audiences the same two wonderful truths about His unique identity.

- I. Scene one: Jesus taught the disciples (16-21).
 - A. By His actions He revealed His Lordship (16-19).
 1. He sends us into difficult circumstances at times (16-18).
 2. When we feel alone, He is nearer than we think (19a).
 3. He is not limited by the things that limit us (19b).
 - B. By His words He revealed His love (20-21).
 1. He introduced Himself as the I AM.
 2. He told them to stop being afraid.
- II. Scene two: Jesus taught the crowd (22-27).
 - A. By His actions He again revealed His Lordship (22-24).
 1. Jesus does not operate according to human whims.
 2. Jesus' does what He does because He is who He is.
 - B. By His words He once again revealed His love (25-27).
 1. He helped them see their deficient motives (26).
 2. He helped them see their real need (27a).
 3. He helped them see His amazing offer (27b).
 4. He helped them see His true identity (27c).

Response: What is Jesus teaching you today?

1. Do you need to invite Him into the boat?
2. Do you need to start eating a different kind of food?
3. Whatever you need, He alone can provide.

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “crowd”? I think of the Middle East and the crowds of people we’ve seen on our televisions and computers this week. We surely have witnessed the power of a crowd, have we not? Just listen to this description of what a crowd did in Cairo two days ago, as told by the Associated Press:

Protesters demanding President Hosni Mubarak's ouster packed Cairo's central square by the tens of thousands Friday, waving Egyptian flags, singing the national anthem and cheering, appearing undaunted and determined after their camp withstood two days of street battles with regime supporters trying to dislodge them.

Thousands including families with children flowed over bridges across the Nile into Tahrir Square, a sign that they were not intimidated after the protesters fended off everything thrown at them by pro-Mubarak attackers — storms of hurled concrete, metal rebar and firebombs, fighters on horses and camels and automatic gunfire barrages. The protesters passed through a series of beefed-up checkpoints by the military and the protesters themselves guarding the square.

The crowd, which appeared to approach 100,000, was the biggest since Tuesday, when a quarter-million turned out. A man sitting in a wheelchair was lifted — wheelchair and all — over the heads of the crowd and he pumped his arms in the air. Thousands prostrated in noon prayers and immediately after uttering the prayer's concluding "God's peace and blessings be upon you," they began chanting their message to Mubarak: "Leave! Leave! Leave!"¹

Egypt needs our prayers, for sure.

The fact is, crowds in the Middle East are nothing new. We’re going to see one as we return in our Bibles this morning to John 6. Verse 2 says that “a great crowd of people” followed Jesus. After Jesus miraculously used five loaves and two fish to feed this crowd of five thousand men plus women and children, the huge multitude prepared to “make Him king by force,” says verse 15.

At which point Jesus took off for a mountain to be alone, and sent His disciples on a boat away from the crowd to the other side of the lake. That’s odd. I’m intrigued by how Jesus responded to crowds, and not just this one but throughout His ministry. He

*** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110204/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_egypt

ministered to crowds, for sure, but then He left them and sought to shield His disciples from their dangerous influence.

Church growth strategists, take note. If you're reaching people Jesus' way, you'll realize that sending crowds away is as important, if not more so, than trying to reach them.

Of course, the crowd that clung to Jesus didn't quit. That's the nature of a crowd. Verse 24 says, "Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus." Yet by the time Jesus is done with this persistent crowd, they'll be grumbling at Him and then leaving in frustration (41, 61, & 66). And of course, we well know what another crowd did to Jesus just months later when it pled with Pilate for the crucifixion of the Messiah.

My friend, the crowds today are still speaking. Some are saying that Jesus is but one religious option among many. Others are saying He'll give you wealth and health, if you'll just believe hard enough. Still others say He didn't even exist but was the product of the wild imaginations of His followers.

It's time to stop listening to the crowds, and go the Source Himself. The fact is, Jesus, by His own admission, is in a class all by Himself. The reason He alone can do what no other can do, namely save you from your sins and guarantee you life beyond the grave, is because He alone is God's chosen Messiah. That's what He claimed. And that's what He proved by His accomplishments.

You say, "Show me." Okay, here's an accomplishment that separates Him from the pack. *One night He walked on water.* I don't know how much He weighed—160, 175, 185? But I do know this. He put one foot in front of another on top of churning lake water and did not sink. Mohamed never did that. Neither did Buddha, nor any other religious teacher. But Jesus did.

These miracles are written, says John, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that by believing you may have life in His name (20:31). The fact is, Jesus' walking on the water is the fifth miraculous sign John recorded in His Gospel (see 2:11; 4:54; 5:1-17; 6:1-15), and all of these signs are meant to convince us that Jesus alone is the source of eternal life (20:31).

Let me give you the big idea of today's message and then we'll flesh it out. In John 6:16-27 Jesus the Master Teacher, in two different scenes, used two different lesson plans to teach two different audiences the same two wonderful truths about His unique identity. And you belong to one of those audiences.

Scan the text and you'll see the two scenes—one is verses 16-21, the other verses 22-27. The two audiences—first Jesus taught His disciples, then He taught the crowds. The twofold lesson plan—in both scenes Jesus used actions first, then words. And the two truths in both scenes—He taught first about His Lordship and then about His love.

I. Scene one: Jesus taught the disciples (16-21).

Our story begins in verses 16-17, "When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake,¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them."²

According to the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark, Jesus made the disciples get into this boat and leave the crowd before He left the crowd (Matt. 14:22-23; Mark 6:45-46). He actually stayed behind and personally sent the multitudes away. Then, after bidding the crowd farewell, He departed to the mountain by Himself in order to pray.

² John says they headed west for Capernaum. Mark 6:45 states He sent the disciples *to Bethsaida*, a neighboring town, indicating He intended to minister in both places.

Both texts specify He made the disciples go “ahead of Him,” indicating He must have told them He’d catch up later.

I wonder if He told them His travel plans. John 6:22 indicates there was only one boat there, the one Jesus told the disciples to use. “Lord, if we take the boat without You, how will You reach the other side?”

Apparently, that’s not important for us to know. But this is. When the crowd began to clamor for Jesus to be king, Jesus quickly sent His disciples away. Why? To protect them from danger. What kind of danger? From the danger of thinking like the crowd.

Wiersbe points out that Rome’s formula for keeping people happy was “bread and circuses.” Give people food and entertainment, and they’ll give you what you want. Rome set aside ninety-three days each year for public games at government’s expense. “It was cheaper to entertain the crowds than to fight them or jail them,” says Wiersbe.³

So Jesus is protecting His disciples from the influence of this dangerous crowd. He doesn’t want His followers thinking like this crowd. So He sends them away.

There’s a lesson here. Don’t miss it.

A. By His actions He revealed His Lordship (16-19). Jesus doesn’t react to situations. He initiates them. He orchestrates them. He controls them. He uses them for His purposes. By His actions in this scene, Jesus taught His disciples (and that includes you if you are His disciple) four things about His Lordship.

1. *He sends us into difficult circumstances at times (16-18).* Notice verse 18, “A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough [lit. ‘the sea was being raised’].” Matthew’s account says the boat “was battered by the waves” because the wind was “contrary” (NAS). Mark says the wind was “against them” (NAS).

That’s interesting. The disciples are fighting for their lives, and why are they in this situation? Because of the devil’s attack? No. The forces of nature? No. Because Jesus sent them into it.

Didn’t Jesus know this storm was coming? Of course He knew. Then why did He jeopardize their safety by sending them right into this danger? “Quite the opposite,” says Wiersbe. “He was rescuing them from the greater danger, the danger of being swept along by a fanatical crowd.”⁴

My friends, sometimes we face a storm because we’ve disobeyed the Lord, that’s true. Take Jonah, for instance. But there are other times when a storm hits precisely because we have obeyed the Lord. It’s because we did what the Lord told us to do (in this case, *get in the boat and head for Capernaum and I’ll join you later*) that we found ourselves in the fight of our lives.

Where is Jesus when that happens? Asleep? No. He’s up above in perfect control of the situation. In this case, though the disciples didn’t know it, their Master was up on that mountain interceding for them. In fact, according to verse 4 it is Passover time which means it is the time of the full moon. And not that He needs the light, of course, but while Jesus is up on the mountain He likely has a good view of the men He loves down below on the water.

2. *When we feel alone, He is nearer than we think (19a).*

We need some geography to appreciate this event. The Sea of Galilee is some 700 feet below sea level. The hills that surround the 13 mile by 7 mile lake rise abruptly to about 2,000 feet above sea level. So there’s a sharp drop of 3,000 feet from where Jesus was on the top of one of those hills to where the disciples are in that boat.

³ Wiersbe, p. 310.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, p. 310.

Furthermore, that topography created all kinds of challenges for boat travel in the first century (as today). The Sea of Galilee is known for its sudden and violent storms. MacArthur explains, “The cooler air rushes down the slopes and strikes the surface of the lake with great force, churning the water into whitecaps and creating dangerous conditions for small boats.”⁵

That’s precisely what happened that night. The wind is howling and the waves are beating against the boat like it’s a cork in the water.

Verse 19 says, “When they had rowed three or three and a half miles.” Matthew’s account (14:24) indicates the boat was “a long distance from the land,” and Mark says (6:47) the boat had been pushed toward the “middle of the sea.” Since the trip from Bethsaida to Capernaum was only four miles to begin with, and since the most direct route was to follow the shoreline, I take this to mean the wind has blown the disciples’ boat off course out further into the lake than intended.

Then came the shock of their lives. Verse 19 states, “They saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified.”

More than half of the men in that boat were experienced fisherman (MacArthur says as many as seven of them were). These men know this lake and they know how to handle a boat on this lake, even in storms. But they don’t know what to do with this, someone walking on top of the water right outside their boat.

Some commentators say Jesus didn’t really walk on the water, but was actually on the shore. They say the disciples were closer to shore than they realized, and they mistakenly thought Jesus was walking on the water. That’s impossible for four reasons. One, Matthew 14:24 specifically says the boat was “a considerable distance” from the shore (lit. “many stadia,” a stadion being about an eighth of a mile). And two, Jesus wasn’t the only one who walked on the water that night, as we’ll discuss in a moment. Three, the text says Jesus “approached the boat.” And four, the text says He did so “walking on the water.”

Without saying a word Jesus taught His disciples a second powerful lesson about His Lordship that night. When we feel alone, He is always nearer than we think.

3. *He is not limited by the things that limit us (19b).* Like water and wind, for starters, and bank accounts and cancer, too.

I just wonder what kind of conversation went on in that boat before they spotted Jesus. Can’t you hear Thomas? “I doubt we’re going to make it!” And James, “Oh, if only Jesus was here right now! He’d fix this problem.” And Peter, “Yea, but we took the only boat and He can’t get here.”

And then, all of a sudden, He did get there, *walking on the water!*

And His timing was perfect. Matthew 14:25 says He came to them “in the fourth watch of the night.” That’s between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. Do the math. Jesus left the disciples the previous evening at around 6:00 (Mark 6:47 says it was “evening,” as does John 6:16). That means these men have been out on that boat alone for at least nine hours.⁶

And then He came walking by. Mark 6:48 adds a significant detail that John omits. Mark says, “He was about to pass by them.” Picture the scene. The disciples are facing east because they are seated in the boat and rowing to make the boat move westward. All of a sudden they see a figure heading westward walking right into the same wind they’re

⁵ John MacArthur, p. 231.

⁶ Thomas & Gundry, *Harmony of the Gospels*, p. 104. The Harmony observes, “All this time they were fighting the storm, and He was praying.”

fighting. But the wind that was holding them back doesn't hold Him back. They are struggling to move an inch, and the Sovereign Lord zips by like He's walking downhill!

That's your Savior, brothers and sisters. He's not limited by the things that limit you and me. Are you in the middle of a storm right now? Take heart. You're not there by accident, for sure. And you're not alone either.

So there's lesson one. By His actions Jesus revealed His Lordship. What kind of effect did His actions produce? Verse 19 says the disciples were *terrified*. At which point Jesus communicated a second lesson.

B. By His words He revealed His love (20-21). "But he said to them, 'It is I; don't be afraid.'" In the Greek, it's only four words, but oh, what encouraging words!

1. *He introduced Himself as the I AM.* The NIV says, "It is I." But in the Greek it's, "*Ego eimi.*" Literally, "I am." Jesus identifies Himself as the I AM. He used the same words in John 8:58 when He told the critics who said He was demon-possessed, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" And they picked up stones to kill Him.

2. *He told them to stop being afraid.* One Greek word, "*Phobeisthe.*" A present, passive imperative meaning, "Stop being afraid!" It's what I said when my girls were little and ran filled with fright into my room complaining of a monster. How many times do we hear those words in the Bible? There's no reason to be afraid when the Lord of the universe, the great I AM, is with you.

Verse 21 says, "Then they were willing to take him into the boat." Apparently, they didn't want Him in the boat until they heard His voice. That's what fear does. Fear keeps a person from opening up to Christ. If you don't know Him, you won't want Him in your life.

At this point, according to Matthew's account, something else happened. Right after Jesus said, "It is I; don't be afraid," Peter spoke up.

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" That's Matthew 14:28-31. What love!

When you compare the Gospel accounts you discover that at least four miracles happened that night. One, Jesus walked on water. Two, He enabled Peter to do the same, at least until Peter took his eyes off of the Master. Three, according to Mark 6:51, as soon as Jesus got into the boat, *the wind stopped*, and instantly the sea became calm. And the fourth? John says in verse 21, "And immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading." A quadruple miracle!

Are you a disciple of Jesus, my friend? Then He wants you to know this. He is the Lord, and He loves you more than you'll ever know. Look at His works and see His Lordship. Listen to His words and hear His love for you.

And let me remind you why Jesus did this in the first place. A crowd. After feeding the five thousand, Jesus resisted a crowd's attempt to make Him king by force. But that's not because He isn't a king. He is a king, but He's a different kind of king, and He wants His followers to know it. He is a king who has authority over the wind and waves, should He choose to exercise it. He is a king who can change the laws of nature and walk on water, if He so desires. He can take the fear right out of a man's heart, and He can take a boat immediately to its destination. He is a king alright, a king like none other.

What's more, He is a king who came to die for His people. He didn't come to give crowds what they want. He came to give the sinners who make up those crowds what they desperately need. That brings us to scene two...

II. Scene two: Jesus taught the crowd (22-27).

There's a parallel here. As with the disciples, now with the crowd. Actions, then words. Lordship, then love.

A. By His actions He again revealed His Lordship (22-24). “The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone.²³ Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.²⁴ Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.”

It's sort of confusing to follow the action here. The focus begins on the *opposite shore of the lake*. That's where Jesus and the disciples were on the previous day when He fed the five thousand, on the northeastern shore of the Sea. During the previous night Jesus walked on the water and met up with His men, and now they're on the northwest side of the lake, back near Capernaum.

And while John merely says that Jesus went “to the opposite shore,” Matthew and Mark both specify He landed at Gennesaret (Matt. 14:34; Mark 6:53) where He was immediately recognized by the people who brought their sick to Him for healing. That's significant for this isn't the first time Jesus ministered in that region. Earlier He faced ridicule and unbelief there, for Mark 3:20-21 indicates those people had said, “He is out of His mind.” In Matthew 9:34 the Pharisees said, “It is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons.” So while they didn't believe in Him as Messiah, they were more than willing to accept the benefits of His miracles.

Such is the nature of the crowd.

John throws in another detail in verse 23, informing us that some boats⁷ from Tiberias landed where Jesus had fed the multitude. If you look at a map you'll see that Tiberias is on the west-central side of the lake, eight miles away. People are moving all over this lake! Apparently, the Tiberias bunch heard about the free lunch, and showed up hoping for a free breakfast, but to their consternation they showed up too late. Jesus is gone. And once the Tiberias folks and the rest realized it, they all jumped back in their boats and headed for Capernaum to find Jesus.

What's the point of this? Why does John give us these details about this crowd, and their persistent search for Jesus, and His intentional absence. Remember, Jesus sent the crowd away the previous evening, but left before they awakened in the morning. He's teaching this crowd something, isn't He? He's teaching them by His actions about His Lordship.

Here's what they learned, two things...

1. *Jesus does not operate according to human whims.* “I want to see you, Jesus. I just rowed my boat eight miles to have some time with you, and you're not even here. What's up?” Here's what's up. Jesus isn't interested in our games of trivial pursuit. He's not a Genie in a bottle who exists to give us what we want. Rather...

2. *Jesus' does what He does because He is who He is.* You don't come to Him on your terms, but His. And that's because He's not a butler. He's the Lord.

Notice verse 25, “When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, ‘Rabbi, when did you get here?’” So they *found* Him. This is a persistent crowd, and it didn't take ‘no’ for an answer.

⁷ The word indicates “little boats.” It's different from the word for the boat that carried the twelve which was obviously a good-sized boat.

Then they *asked* Him. They posed a curious question, not *how did you get here*, but *when*? They want to know *when He came*. But He didn't tell them. Instead, He immediately began to tell them *why they came*. He doesn't let them set the agenda for this conversation. He sets the agenda. They want to make small talk about Him. He wants to make real talk about them.

Perhaps you're like the people in this crowd. You've come to church today because you want Jesus to give you something. A blessing for your bank account. Some peace of mind. A little guidance for that family challenge that's nagging you. He can take care of those problems, for sure. But there's something He wants you to know, and He may avoid doing anything about those issues until you grasp this one. He is the Lord. By His actions He reveals His Lordship.

But what kind of Lord is He? A dictator that causes crowds to call for His departure? No. Listen to what He told this crowd, and you'll see...

B. By His words He once again revealed His love (25-27). Beginning in verse 26 Jesus begins His discourse on the Bread of Life that will take us through the end of chapter six. Notice how He begins in verses 26-27:

"Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.²⁷ Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.'"

You say, "I thought you said Jesus revealed His love with those words. Sounds like He chastened them to me." But isn't that what true love does? Look again. Jesus put His love on display for this crowd in four wonderful, unexpected ways.

1. *He helped them see their deficient motives (26).* It's not the miracles you're after," He told them. "It's the loaves." Or as Morris puts it, "They were moved not by full hearts, but by full bellies."⁸

It's crass materialism that drives these seekers, and Jesus loves them enough to tell them. "You're looking for Me, that's good, but for the wrong reason. Your priorities are mixed up. You're interested in the things of this world. You want another full belly. I'm not going to give it to you this time. I love you too much."

2. *He helped them see their real need (27a).* "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." That's what you really need, said Jesus. Not food that spoils, but the kind of food that will nourish your soul so you will live forever.

What's He talking about? What food? It sounds like what He told the disciples back at the well in John 4, doesn't it? "I have food to eat that you know nothing about," He had said (4:32). What kind of food? "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work (4:34)." My food is to go the cross and die for sinners. That's the work My Father gave Me to do. Your food is to receive the benefit of what I've provided for you. You need food that endures to eternal life.

"I thought we already had eternal life," the people in the crowd surely mumbled. "We do the works of the Law. We offer sacrifices. We give God our tithes. Surely, you're talking to the wrong crowd, Jesus."

But He knows to whom He's talking, and He knows if they are trusting in their law-keeping efforts then they do *not* possess eternal life, and He loves them enough to tell them. As He does with you and me this morning.

What are you trusting in to take you to heaven? There's only one kind of food that endures to eternal life, and you don't have it in your cupboard. You can't grow it in your

⁸ Leon Morris, p. 358.

garden, or find it in someone else's. Where then? Jesus tells us in the very next phrase, "Work...for food that endures to eternal life, *which the Son of Man will give you.*"

There's the third way He demonstrated His love for that crowd, and us...

3. *He helped them see His amazing offer (27b).* Do you want the food? Then come to Me. I've come to give it to you.

Leon Morris says it well, "Life is not the reward for work. Life is always His gift."⁹

It's true. The talk about "the self-made man" misses the point. You can convince yourself that you have made a good life for yourself by your efforts, but the reality is, the good life you enjoy is yours because of the gracious gifts of your Creator. The brain you've depended on to work your way out of jams, the hands you've used to scratch and claw and accumulate and build, the eyes you've used to see and pursue, where did they come from? They're all gifts.

Morris is right. Life is not the reward for work. Life is always *His gift*.

What's more, until you recognize that, you're not really living. That's why, in spite of all your self-made accomplishments, you can't shake the unending feeling that there's more to life than you're presently experiencing.

You say, "Wait a minute. How can I be sure that Jesus, the Son of Man, can pull off His astounding offer?" Listen to what He said about Himself, "On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval." There's His fourth expression of love...

4. *He helped them see His true identity (27c).* Why do you need Me and not just the bread I can make? Because I am the One upon whom the highest authority in the universe has placed His royal seal. I am telling you that I am here with the authority and approval of God the Father Himself.

My friend, those are not the words of a man who claimed to be one option to heaven. He claimed exclusive rights, a claim infuriated this crowd as we'll see in the coming weeks. But He told them because He loved them.

Lordship and love. That's what a disciple needs to know about Him. And so do people in the crowd. Let's make it personal.

Response: What is Jesus teaching you today?

I invite you to ponder two questions and one conclusion.

1. *Do you need to invite Him into the boat?* Are you in the middle of a storm, my friend? He sees you. He's right there, too. Will you invite Him in?¹⁰

2. *Do you need to start eating a different kind of food?* Perhaps you've been treating Jesus like a waiter. He's there when you need bread, or a little peace, or a family blessing. But have you ever come to Jesus *for Jesus*? If not, it's time to start eating a different kind of food.

3. *Whatever you need, He alone can provide.*

⁹ Leon Morris, p. 359.

¹⁰ See Psalm 107:23-31