

The Gospel of John, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 9: Feeding the Multitude and Walking on Water

John 6:1-24

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

John 6:1-24 sets up the great “bread of life” discourse that follows by giving us two signs that reveal who Jesus is. Doctrinally, the feeding of the multitude shows His divine power to provide and His abundant generosity, recalling God’s provision of manna in the wilderness, while the walking on the water shows His mastery over creation and, in the words “It is I” (literally “I am”), hints at His divine identity. The teacher should help students see that John records these signs together to prepare for Jesus’ claim to be the true bread from heaven.

At the same time, this passage is rich with formational truth. It contrasts those who calculate and despair (Philip) with those who bring their little to Jesus (Andrew and the boy). It exposes the crowd’s hunger for the gift over the Giver. And it portrays the disciples straining against the wind in the dark until Christ comes, a picture of faith in seasons when He seems absent. The teacher should let the passage search the students’ motives and grow their trust in Christ’s presence and provision.

So aim at both: a clearer vision of Jesus as the divine Provider and Lord of the storm, and a heart that offers Him its little and welcomes Him into its struggles. The disciple we are forming wants the Giver more than the gifts and trusts Him in the dark.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus tested Philip by asking where they could buy bread, “for he himself knew what he would do” (vv. 5-6). What does this reveal about how Jesus uses moments of apparent impossibility in our lives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John tells us that Jesus tested Philip with the question about bread, “for he himself knew what he would do” (v. 6). The impossibility was not a surprise to Jesus; it was an opportunity He had already planned to use.

Help students reframe their own impossibilities. The need was real and beyond the disciples’ resources, but it was fully within Jesus’ purpose. He often allows us to face situations larger than we can handle, not to crush us but to reveal Himself and grow our faith. The test was for Philip’s benefit, not for Jesus’ information.

Draw out the pattern. When we hit the wall of our own inadequacy, that is frequently the very place Jesus intends to work. The end of our resources is often the beginning of His provision. Knowing this changes how we meet impossibilities: not with despair, but with expectation.

Apply it. Where are students facing something beyond their resources right now? Encourage them to see it as a place where Christ may already know what He will do, and to bring the need to Him rather than only calculating the deficit. The God who planned the feeding can be trusted with our impossibilities.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God using moments of impossibility to reveal Himself and grow faith.
- Jesus' sovereign knowledge and purpose in our trials (John 6:6).
- The end of our resources as the place of God's provision.
- Meeting impossibilities with expectation rather than despair.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Jesus use moments of apparent impossibility in our lives?
- What impossibility are you facing where Christ may already know what He will do?
- How would expectation change the way you meet that need?

Question 2

Student Question:

Faced with an overwhelming need, Philip calculated the cost and despaired (v. 7), while Andrew brought what little he found to Jesus (vv. 8–9). When you face a need beyond your resources, which response is more natural for you, and what would it look like to bring your little to Jesus?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question contrasts two responses. Philip calculates: even a fortune would not buy enough (v. 7). Andrew, though uncertain, brings what little he found: "There is a boy here with five barley loaves and two fish, but what are they for so many?" (vv. 8–9). One response stops at the deficit; the other brings the little to Jesus.

Help students recognize their own default. Many of us are Philips, quick to total up why something cannot be done, paralyzed by the gap between the need and our resources. Calculation is not wrong, but it becomes despair when it leaves Jesus out of the equation.

Hold up Andrew's example. He did not pretend the lunch was adequate; he plainly admitted it was tiny. But he brought it to Jesus anyway. That is the move that matters: not denying our limitations, but placing our little in the hands of the One who multiplies.

Apply it concretely. Ask students to name a need that feels beyond their resources and to consider what “bringing their little to Jesus” would look like there, a small first step of obedience, a prayer of offered inadequacy, a willingness to act rather than only to calculate. The boy’s lunch fed thousands once it was placed in Jesus’ hands.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between calculating despair and bringing our little to Jesus.
- Honesty about our inadequacy combined with trust in Christ.
- God’s pattern of multiplying what is offered to Him.
- Faith that acts rather than only calculates.

Discussion Prompts

- Which response is more natural for you, Philip’s or Andrew’s?
- What need feels beyond your resources right now?
- What would it look like to bring your little to Jesus this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus fed more than five thousand people from five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets left over (vv. 10–13). What does this abundance teach us about the character and provision of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The miracle is marked by stunning abundance. More than five thousand people eat “as much as they wanted” (v. 11), and twelve baskets of fragments remain (v. 13). There was not merely enough; there was more at the end than at the beginning.

Draw out what this reveals about God’s character. He is not stingy. The God who feeds the multitude does so generously, providing fullness and leftovers. This echoes His provision of manna in the wilderness and reveals a Provider whose resources never run short (Philippians 4:19).

Connect provision to trust. The abundance is meant to grow confidence that God can be relied upon. He is not a reluctant giver who must be pried open, but a generous Father who delights to provide. This frees us from the anxious scarcity that drives so much of life.

Apply it without prosperity distortion. The point is not that God guarantees luxury, but that He is faithful to provide what His people truly need, and often more abundantly than we expect. Help students rest in the generous character of God, and let that rest loosen their grip on anxious hoarding and worry.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The abundant generosity of God's provision (John 6:11–13).
- God as a generous Father, not a reluctant giver.
- Provision that echoes the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16).
- Trust in God's character as the cure for anxious scarcity.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the abundance teach about the character of God?
- Where does anxious scarcity drive your decisions?
- How can the generosity of God loosen your grip on worry?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus had the leftovers gathered up “that nothing may be lost” (v. 12). What does this attention to the fragments teach you about how God values what seems small or leftover, including the seemingly small parts of your own life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up a small but striking detail: Jesus had the leftovers gathered “that nothing may be lost” (v. 12). The One who could create bread from nothing cared that the fragments not be wasted. Abundance did not make Him careless.

Draw out what this reveals about how God values the small and the leftover. He does not despise fragments. In a kingdom of abundance, nothing is treated as disposable. This is a window into a God who notices and treasures what others would discard.

Apply it to the students' sense of their own seemingly small or wasted parts. Many people feel that their hidden faithfulness, their small acts of service, their unimpressive seasons, or even the broken fragments of their past, do not count for much. This verse says God gathers up the fragments. Nothing offered to Him is lost.

Encourage a corresponding faithfulness in the small. If God values the fragments, then so should we, in how we steward small resources, attend to small duties, and value people the world overlooks. Ask each student where they have dismissed something as too small to matter, and to offer it to the God who lets nothing be lost.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's care that nothing be lost or wasted (John 6:12).
- The value God places on the small, hidden, and leftover.
- Hidden faithfulness gathered up and treasured by God.
- Faithful stewardship of small things in imitation of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus' care for the fragments teach you about God?
- What part of your life have you dismissed as too small to matter?
- How might you offer that to the God who lets nothing be lost?

Question 5

Student Question:

The crowd concluded, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!" and tried to make Him king by force (vv. 14–15). Why did Jesus refuse the kind of kingship they wanted, and what does this reveal about the nature of His kingdom?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The crowd draws a half-right conclusion ("This is indeed the Prophet") and then a wrong response: they intend to "take him by force to make him king" (vv. 14–15). They wanted a bread-king, a political deliverer who would meet their material needs and overthrow Rome. Jesus withdrew alone to the mountain.

Explain why Jesus refused. The kingship they wanted was real but distorted, a kingdom of bread and political power on their terms. Jesus' kingdom is not established by force or built on free meals; it is the reign of God in hearts, advancing through truth and the cross, not the sword (compare 18:36). To accept their crown would have been to accept the wrong kingship.

Connect this to the nature of His kingdom. The kingdom of God is not a future earthly political regime, and it was not the bread-and-Rome kingdom the crowd wanted. It is the present reign of Christ, established when His church began and advancing now through the gospel as He rules from the Father's right hand (Daniel 2:44; Mark 1:15; Colossians 1:13). Jesus refuses to let His kingship be redefined as political and material.

Apply it to our own expectations. We can want Jesus to be the kind of king who fixes our circumstances on our terms, and resist the King who calls us to follow Him through self-denial. Help students examine whether they want the real Christ and His real kingdom, or a bread-king of their own design.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' refusal of a political, bread-centered kingship (John 6:15).
- The nature of Christ's kingdom as spiritual and present, not a future earthly regime (Daniel 2:44; Colossians 1:13).
- The kingdom advancing through truth and the cross, not force.
- The danger of wanting a Christ redesigned to serve our agenda.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did Jesus refuse the kingship the crowd wanted?
- What does this reveal about the nature of His kingdom?
- Do you want the real Christ, or a king of your own design?

Question 6

Student Question:

The disciples were straining at the oars against the wind, in the dark, without Jesus (vv. 16–18). When have you found yourself rowing hard against the wind in a season when Christ seemed absent, and how did you keep going?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the disciples' hard night: "the sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing" and they were "rowing" against it in the dark, with Jesus not yet with them (vv. 18–19). It is a vivid picture of faithful effort in a season when Christ seems absent.

Help students identify with the disciples. There are seasons when we are doing the right thing, straining at the oars, yet the wind is against us and Christ feels far away. The darkness and the distance from shore make it worse. Many believers know this experience and wonder if something is wrong with their faith.

Normalize and dignify the struggle. The disciples were exactly where Jesus had sent them, and still the storm came and He seemed absent. Hard, dark seasons are not necessarily a sign of failure or sin; they are part of the journey. The key is to keep rowing, to keep doing the next faithful thing, even when we cannot see Christ.

Then point ahead to the comfort that comes. Jesus was not as absent as He seemed; He came to them on the water. Ask students to recall a season of rowing against the wind, what helped them keep going, and to take heart that Christ sees them in the dark and will come. Encourage one concrete way to keep rowing faithfully in a current hard season.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faithful effort in seasons when Christ seems absent.
- Hard, dark seasons as part of the journey, not necessarily a sign of failure.
- Continuing to do the next faithful thing in the storm.
- Christ's nearness even when He seems far.

Discussion Prompts

- When have you been rowing hard against the wind with Christ seeming absent?
- What helped you keep going?
- How can you keep rowing faithfully in a current hard season?

Question 7

Student Question:

When Jesus came walking on the sea, He said, “It is I; do not be afraid” (v. 20), words that echo the divine name “I am.” What does His mastery over the storm reveal about who He is?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Jesus comes walking on the sea, His words are charged with meaning: “It is I; do not be afraid” (v. 20). The Greek is literally “I am” (ego eimi), the divine name God revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14). Spoken over a storm, by One walking on the waves, it is a quiet revelation of deity.

Draw out what walking on the sea reveals. In the Old Testament, treading on the waves and stilling the sea are works of God alone (Job 9:8; Psalm 77:19; Psalm 107:29). By walking on the water and calming the disciples’ fear, Jesus does what only God does. This is no mere wonder-worker; this is the Lord of creation.

Connect the “I am” to John’s larger purpose. John will record several “I am” statements, and this one, over the sea, signals that the carpenter from Nazareth bears the divine name and divine authority. The disciples are in the presence of God in the boat.

Apply it to fear. The same Lord who masters the storm speaks “do not be afraid” to His frightened followers. His mastery over what we cannot control is the ground of peace in our storms. Help students bring a specific fear to the One who walks on the waves and says, “I am; do not be afraid.”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus’ words “I am” echoing the divine name (Exodus 3:14; John 6:20).
- Walking on and mastering the sea as a work of God alone (Job 9:8; Psalm 107:29).
- The deity of Christ revealed over the storm.
- Christ’s mastery over creation as the ground of peace in fear.

Discussion Prompts

- What does Jesus’ mastery over the storm reveal about who He is?
- Why is it significant that He says “I am”?
- What fear do you need to bring to the Lord of the storm?

Question 8

Student Question:

As soon as they were willing to take Jesus into the boat, “immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (v. 21). What does this teach about what changes when we welcome Christ into our struggles rather than facing them alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John records a striking detail: when the disciples were “glad to take him into the boat... immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going” (v. 21). The moment they welcomed Christ, the straining ended and they reached their destination.

Draw out the picture, carefully and not mechanically. The disciples had been straining against the wind for hours, getting nowhere by their own effort. When Christ was received into the boat, what their labor could not accomplish was accomplished. There is a lesson here about the difference Christ’s welcomed presence makes.

Apply it to facing struggles with or without Christ. We often try to row through our storms by sheer effort, white-knuckling our difficulties alone. The invitation is to welcome Christ into the actual boat of our struggle, our marriage, our fear, our work, our grief, rather than keeping Him at the edge while we strain.

Be honest about what this does and does not promise. It does not promise that every storm ends instantly when we pray. It does promise that Christ’s welcomed presence changes everything about how we face the storm, and that He brings us, in the end, to the shore He intends. Ask each student where they have been rowing alone and how they might welcome Christ into that struggle.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference Christ’s welcomed presence makes in our struggles.
- The futility of facing storms by self-effort alone.
- Welcoming Christ into the actual place of our difficulty.
- Christ bringing us to the shore He intends.

Discussion Prompts

- What changes when we welcome Christ into our struggles?
- Where have you been rowing alone, keeping Christ at the edge?
- How might you welcome Him into that struggle this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Putting the two signs together, the feeding of the multitude and the walking on the water, what is John showing us about the identity of Jesus, and how do these signs prepare us for Jesus’ great claim, “I am the bread of life,” which follows?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, asking students to read the two signs together and see what John is building toward. The feeding of the multitude reveals Jesus as the divine Provider who satisfies hunger abundantly, recalling the manna God gave in the wilderness. The walking on the water reveals Jesus as Lord over creation who bears the divine name “I am.” Both point to His deity.

Show how John arranges these signs intentionally. They are not random miracles; they are evidence assembled to prepare the reader for the discourse that follows. Immediately after, Jesus will declare, “I am the bread of life” (6:35). The feeding sets up the claim: as God once gave manna, so now Jesus gives Himself as the true bread from heaven. The sea-crossing reinforces that the One making this claim is no mere prophet but the divine “I am.”

Tie the manna theme together. In the wilderness, God fed Israel with bread from heaven that sustained physical life for a day. Jesus is about to say that He is the true bread from heaven that gives eternal life. The physical sign points to a spiritual reality. The crowd wanted more bread; Jesus wanted to give them Himself.

Bring it to the heart and prepare for next week. The signs are meant to lift the students’ eyes from the gifts to the Giver, and to ready them for the staggering claim that Jesus is the bread of life. Help students see that John’s whole design is to lead them to feed on Christ Himself by faith, not merely to admire His miracles. The question the signs press is the question of the next lesson: will we come to Him as the bread of life?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two signs together revealing Jesus as divine Provider and Lord over creation.
- John’s intentional arrangement of signs to prepare for “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35).
- Jesus as the true bread from heaven, fulfilling the manna (Exodus 16).
- The signs pointing from the gifts to the Giver.
- The aim of leading us to feed on Christ Himself by faith.

Discussion Prompts

- What is John showing us about Jesus by pairing these two signs?
- How does the feeding prepare us for “I am the bread of life”?
- How do the signs lift our eyes from the gifts to the Giver?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over this passage, from the boy's lunch to the figure on the waves. What is one specific way Jesus is forming you, both to offer Him your little and to trust His presence in the storm?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers the lesson's two great themes: offering Christ our little, and trusting His presence in the storm. Both are matters of formation, of becoming the kind of disciple who lives differently because of who Jesus is.

Help students hold the two together. The boy offered his small lunch and saw Jesus multiply it; the disciples welcomed Jesus into the storm and reached the shore. Both involved bringing what they had, or their need, to Christ rather than facing it alone. The Christian life is learning to do both habitually.

Make it concrete. Ask each student to name one specific way Jesus is forming them to offer Him their little, a resource, an ability, a small act of obedience, and one way He is forming them to trust His presence in a current storm. Specificity is where formation happens.

Close by returning to the heart of the chapter: the danger of wanting the gifts more than the Giver. The deepest formation this passage works is a reordering of our desires, so that we come to want Christ Himself, the Provider and the Lord of the storm, more than anything He can give. Let students leave longing for the Giver.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Offering our little to Christ and trusting His presence in the storm.
- Bringing our resources and our needs to Christ rather than facing them alone.
- The reordering of desire to want the Giver more than the gifts.
- Concrete, specific formation as the goal of the lesson.

Discussion Prompts

- What is one way Jesus is forming you to offer Him your little?
- What current storm do you need to trust His presence in?
- How is He reshaping your desire to want Him more than His gifts?