

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 17: John's Death; Feeding the Multitude; Walking on Water -- Matthew 14:1-36

Matthew 14 opens in a palace and ends on a stormy sea, and between those two scenes you meet two utterly different kinds of power. The chapter begins with Herod, a king with a crown, a court, and an army, who is nonetheless so weak that he murders a prophet rather than lose face at a dinner party. It ends with Jesus, who has no palace and no army, walking across the waves of the sea and stilling the wind with a word. Matthew sets these portraits side by side on purpose. He wants us to see what real power looks like, and to whom it belongs.

First comes the grim story of John the Baptist. Herod had imprisoned him for telling the truth about the king's adultery. At a birthday banquet, dazzled by a dancing girl and trapped by a reckless oath made in front of his guests, Herod orders John beheaded. He does it not out of conviction but out of cowardice, "for the sake of his oaths and his guests" (v. 9). It is one of the saddest scenes in the Gospels: a man with all the power in the room, too afraid of the people watching to do what he knew was right. The forerunner of the Messiah dies because a king cared more about his image than the truth.

Then Jesus, grieving the death of His cousin and seeking solitude, is followed by a desperate crowd, and instead of turning them away He "had compassion on them and healed their sick" (v. 14). As evening falls and the people grow hungry, He takes five loaves and two fish, gives thanks, and feeds more than five thousand with food left over. Where Herod hoarded power to protect himself, Jesus pours out power to serve others. The contrast could not be sharper. One king takes a life to save his pride; the other multiplies bread to fill the hungry.

And then the night on the water, where the deepest truth of the chapter breaks the surface. The disciples are battling a storm when they see Jesus walking toward them on the sea, and His words cut through their terror: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (v. 27). Peter steps out, walks on the water with his eyes on Jesus, then sinks the moment he looks at the wind. Jesus catches him, and the disciples fall down in worship, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God" (v. 33). That confession is where this whole chapter has been heading. The One who feeds the hungry, masters the storm, and reaches down to catch a sinking man is not merely a great teacher. He is the Son of God, and He is worthy of our worship.

Group Discussion: This chapter sets two kinds of power side by side: Herod, who kills a prophet to protect his pride, and Jesus, who pours out compassion to feed the hungry and rescue the sinking. What does the contrast between these two men reveal about what real greatness and real power actually look like?

Personal Reflection: Peter walked on the water as long as his eyes were on Jesus, but “when he saw the wind, he was afraid,” and began to sink (v. 30). What is the ‘wind’ in your life right now that pulls your eyes away from Christ, and what happens in your heart when you start looking at the storm instead of the Savior?

Read Matthew 14:1–36

Study Questions

1. Matthew tells us Herod had John beheaded “for the sake of his oaths and his guests” (v. 9), even though he was grieved by the request. What does this account teach about the difference between worldly power and true righteousness, and about where the fear of man leads a person?
2. Herod silenced the voice that confronted his sin rather than repent of it. Where in your own life are you tempted to silence, avoid, or explain away the voice that calls you to repentance, whether it is Scripture, a brother or sister, or your own conscience?
3. When Jesus saw the great crowd, “he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (v. 14) and then fed them, even though He had just lost John and was seeking solitude. What does Jesus’ compassion in this moment reveal about the heart of God toward needy and hungry people?
4. Jesus took what little the disciples had, five loaves and two fish, gave thanks, and multiplied it to feed thousands. Where are you tempted to withhold the ‘little’ you have, your time, resources, or gifts, because it seems too small for God to use?
5. When the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, He says, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid” (v. 27). What is the significance of Jesus walking on the sea and of the words He speaks, and what do they reveal about who He is?

6. Jesus came to the disciples in the storm “in the fourth watch of the night” (v. 25), in the darkest, most exhausting hour. When have you experienced Jesus drawing near in your hardest hour, and how does this scene shape the way you face your present storms?
7. Peter walks on the water while his eyes are fixed on Jesus, but begins to sink when he sees the wind, and Jesus says, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (vv. 29–31). What does this teach about the nature of faith, the danger of doubt, and how faith is sustained?
8. When Peter began to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me,” and Jesus “immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him” (vv. 30–31). Where do you need to stop trying to keep yourself afloat and simply cry out for the hand of Christ to catch you?
9. The chapter reaches its climax when those in the boat worship Jesus, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God” (v. 33). What does it mean to confess Jesus as the Son of God, why is this confession central to the gospel and to becoming a Christian, and how does genuine recognition of who He is lead to worship and obedience?
10. Look back across the whole chapter: Herod’s cowardice, Jesus’ compassion, the storm, Peter’s faith and doubt, and the worship in the boat. Name one specific way Jesus, the compassionate Lord of the storm and Son of God, is calling you to keep your eyes on Him and worship Him more truly this week.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Mark 6:14–29, the fuller account of John’s death and Herod’s troubled conscience; Psalm 23:1–5, the Shepherd who makes us lie down and prepares a table for us; John 6:26–35, Jesus as the bread of life who satisfies the deepest hunger; Job 9:8, God who alone treads on the waves of the sea; Hebrews 4:14–16, drawing near with confidence to Jesus, the Son of God who sympathizes with us.