



Have we bitten off more than we can chew? Over seventy percent of Americans report experiencing stress in their daily lives. What is causing all this anxiety and stress? The irony is that we are one of the most well supplied, secure, and wealthy nations in the history of the world, yet many report being overextended, overworked, overburdened, and overwhelmed. And really that's not just us. That's human nature and all the world. Everyone always seems to feel overextended and overwhelmed. Are Christians any different in this regard? Today we see how Jesus teaches his disciples to remain free from being overwhelmed.

If ever there was a time when Jesus and his disciples might have felt like they were biting off more than they could chew it would have been at this point. Jesus was reaching the height of his popularity for his earthly ministry. And the demands placed on him and his disciples were growing. To top it off around this time Jesus and his disciples were headed to a time of testing, rejection, and great trials. Popularity, high demand, and new enemies were the perfect recipe for becoming overextended and overwhelmed.

Recent events were taking a toll on them. John the Baptizer had been beheaded by Herod. Jesus and his disciples had to take this as a heavy blow. John was a relative of Mary Magdalene and was part of the family circle. He was probably close to Jesus. And John was a forerunner to the Messiah. He had served as the mentor for a number of Jesus' disciples, having baptized them and brought them to Jesus. His execution sent a clear message: those who preach and teach Christ and who follow Christ are not free from martyrdom. The loss, the grief, and the dangers must have felt emotionally draining to them all.

And the physical strain was no small matter. The twelve disciples had recently been sent out on a mission trip across all Israel and were no doubt tired upon returning. The disciples were no doubt excited for more ministry. But as the crowds surrounded them, it seemed they were biting off more than they could chew. Mark records that they were so busy they didn't even get a chance to eat. It had to be physically draining for them all. They were overextended, overworked, overburdened and no doubt feeling overwhelmed.

So, Jesus did what any man would do when he sees his crew is overextended. He withdrew with his disciples in a boat to a solitary place. Matthew records Jesus' intent: "to be alone." I'm sure we can all relate to being physically and emotionally drained and needing to get away from it all. There's a line in a popular movie. A character named Bilbo is getting old and tired. He plans to go away on a long holiday and never return. He clearly loved food because he described his weariness as, "I feel like butter spread over too much bread." Maybe you can at times relate to that feeling. The disciples were like butter spread too thin. And Jesus, though in very nature true God, bodily felt the weight of being weary. In humility the Lord of all was worn down in body. So, the same God who gave his people the Sabbath for rest invited his twelve disciples to get away from the crowds. They withdrew by boat to a solitary place.

We might occasionally need this reminder. When it feels like everything depends on us for our family, our friends, or our work we need to acknowledge our need for physical and spiritual rest. I was reminded of this in a funny way last month when driving with my family on a vacation. The first day on the road my streaming music service picked out a song for me. As I began some time away from pastoral ministry and time for rest the song picked for me had the refrain, "You can't save everybody." We all have limits; we all need rest.

But the disciples quickly learned that planning a getaway doesn't always mean you get away from things that make you feel stretched thin. The crowds heard the report of where Jesus was headed and they followed on foot. Their number grew so that it became a large crowd, eventually numbering over 5000 men.

Jesus' immediate response was compassion. For all the times we grow irritable when tired, Jesus did not. He grew weary, but his compassion could never be spread too thin. He taught them and healed their sick.

But by the time evening came the disciples were fed up with the crowd. They were too small; the crowd too big. They approached Jesus and asked him to dismiss the crowds so that they could go and get their own food. Jesus replied, "*You don't need to send them away. You give them something to eat.*" This must have felt like the last straw for the disciples. "*You want us to serve? All we have is five loaves and two fish.*"

Have you ever felt like this? You reach the end of a long day, tired and hungry. You're unable to handle any more. And then one more request falls on your lap. The mother who has just gotten over a sickness and spent all night with her crying newborn doesn't need to hear her five-year old say, "I'm still hungry." The father who just worked overtime and had to deal with a crisis at work doesn't need to come home and hear

that it's on him to fix a leaking pipe. The foster family who just made it through a difficult medical emergency doesn't need to hear there's just one more court appearance. The charity organization that is behind in finances doesn't need to hear that it must pay double for next year's property insurance. The exhausted congregational chairman doesn't need to hear there's just one more special meeting. Jesus isn't telling you to come up with a way to feed five thousand people in a desolate place. But in our various vocations in life, we are asked to do things which make us feel overextended, overworked, overburdened, and overwhelmed.

When we are overextended, we have two default options. One, of course, is to check out and give up. Option two is to keep trying until we really are overwhelmed and crash. Sadly, many see no other option. And these options are often followed with sinful solutions. What does the mother do who is feeling so overwhelmed? The world teaches them to neglect their children and kill their next offspring before it even gets a chance to breathe. What does a man do who is feeling overworked and overextended? The world teaches him to yell at his family and abandon his wife and responsibilities. What does the ailing church do that is running dry on funds and spread too thin? They are tempted to toss compassion out the window and decide it's every man for himself. Dismiss the crowds. Cease to gather. Forget about faith, hope, and love. Forget about serving. Those are the two default options when feeling overwhelmed. Cave in or crash. After biting off more than we can chew, we can choke on our own selfishness. We can fail to serve God and even end up serving the devil. If we continue with this foolishness we can fall from faith and be served the same sentence as the devil.

Why is Jesus doing asking his disciples to do the impossible? Wasn't it his idea to getaway and be alone for a while? Why does he put it on his disciples to do one more thing, an impossible one at that?

He was helping them to first see their own helplessness and their inabilities. And then helping them remember what makes us different. When we are weary, we first need to hear what God is calling us to do. Then trust in his provision. I had a mentor when I was training for ministry who made it a point to tell me, "Ministry will be difficult. It will at times make you feel overextended, overworked, overburdened." I think I was too overconfident to believe him then, but I've felt it since. Serving can get hard! But he made it a point to tell me that I would "never be overwhelmed." His point wasn't that I could do everything, but that God had called me to service. And it would never be just me serving. I could trust God and rely on him to accomplish the tasks he called me to do. That's what Jesus was teaching his disciples.

Jesus asked his disciples to serve, and then provided all they needed for their work. God provides not just enough, but abundance. Hadn't God done this before? Didn't he feed millions of people in the wilderness for forty years? Didn't God provide for Elijah during the famine with food from the ravens? Didn't Elijah learn he could tell the widow as she prepared her last meal, "Bring it to me. Trust in God to provide." So, Jesus, hearing there were only five loaves and two fish available said, "Bring it to me."

Weary and wondering about it all the disciples did just that. Jesus then started where we so often fail when we've run short. He gave thanks for the bread and the fish. And he gave the pieces to his disciples who in turn distributed the pieces to the crowd. They miraculously all ate and were satisfied. Everyone in the large crowd was permitted to bite off more than they could chew, but in a good way.

The disciples saw their own inabilities. But they saw the Lord would abundantly provide. Notice too that they were still involved in service. "You give them something to eat." They did! They gave the crowd what God provided. Tired, hungry, and feeling overwhelmed they were still working and helping distribute the food. Soon only the blessings overwhelmed. There were twelve basketfuls of leftover pieces.

Only after he taught, healed, and fed the crowd did Jesus finally withdraw and rest. That's how our God operates. He will not rest until he provides for all our needs. He had compassion when he saw this world filled with people who are overextended, overworked, overburdened, and overwhelmed because sin's curse. But he would not rest until his work was completed. It didn't look like he had much to offer, but he provided for the whole world. We had only one man and needed only one sacrifice, one out pouring of love. He emptied himself and poured out his blood to meet the needs of this world. He rested on the Sabbath in the tomb. His work was done; the provision was made. We have all we need: the promise of the everlasting feasting with Christ in his everlasting kingdom.

The world is indeed overwhelmed. It will never be satisfied or free of worries by its own means. It crashed and chokes. That's why Jesus comes to his weary people and he says, "See the hungering crowds? Don't send them away. You give them what they need." What makes Christians different? We hear the call to serve others, trusting in Christ to provide. We bring what little we hold, his gifts and precious gospel. And in the best kind of way he gives us more than we can chew on.