

“They All Ate and Were Satisfied” (Luke 9:1–17)

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What is something in your life that seems impossible? Is there a task that you must do, but you don't know how you'll accomplish it?

What is the greatest opposition you face in life? What is getting in your way?

How will you do the first thing and overcome the second? How can will do the impossible and overcome whatever is stopping you?

There are things in life that seem impossible. It might be a health issue. It might seem impossible that you or your loved ones will get better. It might be a task like raising kids, which sometimes seems impossible. How will we provide for them, protect them, and teach them all the life lessons that they need to learn? Maybe there are impossible people in your life, or you have a job that seems impossible.

There are also things in our lives that seem to be opposing forces. We're trying to do those impossible things, and just when we feel like we're making progress, something or someone comes up against us. If it's our health that we're working on, it could be another illness, an injury, a condition, a disease. If it's raising kids, it could be bad influences on our children, like other kids in school, or drugs. If it's our job that we're talking about, it could be a difficult coworker.

I ask these questions because we're going to see today that Jesus calls his disciples to do tasks that seem impossible. And they are impossible—apart from the power of God. We also see that Jesus and his followers face opposition, sometimes from powerful people. But we will also see that Jesus is able to provide, to make the impossible possible, and Jesus is able to overcome the powers that oppose his people.

We're continuing to study the Gospel of Luke. Today, we'll look at Luke 9:1–17. What I'm going to do is read the whole passage and then focus on those three points: Jesus asks his disciples to do the impossible; Jesus and his disciples face opposition; and Jesus provides and overcomes.

So, let's read Luke 9:1–17:

¹ And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, ² and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of

God and to heal. ³ And he said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. ⁴ And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. ⁵ And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” ⁶ And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere.

⁷ Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, ⁸ by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. ⁹ Herod said, “John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?” And he sought to see him.

¹⁰ On their return the apostles told him all that they had done. And he took them and withdrew apart to a town called Bethsaida. ¹¹ When the crowds learned it, they followed him, and he welcomed them and spoke to them of the kingdom of God and cured those who had need of healing. ¹² Now the day began to wear away, and the twelve came and said to him, “Send the crowd away to go into the surrounding villages and countryside to find lodging and get provisions, for we are here in a desolate place.” ¹³ But he said to them, “You give them something to eat.” They said, “We have no more than five loaves and two fish—unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.” ¹⁴ For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, “Have them sit down in groups of about fifty each.” ¹⁵ And they did so, and had them all sit down. ¹⁶ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing over them. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. ¹⁷ And they all ate and were satisfied. And what was left over was picked up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.¹

So, first, Jesus asks his disciples to do the impossible. He has “the twelve” with him. These are not just any of his disciples, which means “students,” but *the disciples*, or apostles. He sends them to proclaim news of the kingdom of God, that the King has come and people can enter into God’s kingdom by turning from their sin (repenting) and trusting in King Jesus (believing). The verb that’s translated “send” is ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*), which is related to the word “apostle.” These are Jesus’ official messengers, ambassadors, envoys.

Why is this task impossible? Well, miraculously healing diseases is obviously something that is impossible apart from God. But what’s so hard about proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God? On one hand, it’s not hard. You open up your mouth and say what you know about Jesus. But what makes it hard is that people often don’t believe. And you can’t make a person believe. Most of us realize it’s very hard to change a person’s mind. Even if people are confronted with a lot of evidence and persuasive arguments, people are stubborn. I’ve realized

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

that most of us are very irrational. We don't believe something to be true based on evidence. We often want something to be true, and then we believe it, whether there's evidence to support that belief or not. And proclaiming a message that requires people to repent, to stop their old ways of sinning, has never been popular. It tends to be met with apathy and even hatred.

So, the task is hard, perhaps impossible. But Jesus seems to make it even harder. He asks them not to take a staff, a bag, bread, money, or an extra shirt. They're supposed to rely on the kindness of strangers. Perhaps Jesus doesn't want them to appear like they're preaching for money. There were some philosophers in the Roman Empire who went around doing that. But it seems like, more importantly, Jesus is asking these men to trust that God will provide for them. There are going to be people who invite them in to their homes, who give them meals and a place to stay.

So, that's one's impossible thing that Jesus asks his followers to do. But in verses 10–17, Jesus asks them to do something else. After the disciples return from their mission, they retreat with Jesus to Bethsaida. But Jesus has been drawing some large crowds, and they follow him. Jesus welcomed the crowd and did what he asked the disciples to do: he taught them about the kingdom of God and he cured those who were sick.

As the day went on and it was getting late, the disciples showed concern for the crowds. They tell Jesus to send the crowds away so they can manage to find places to stay and food to eat. This is when Jesus asks the impossible of them. He says, "You give them something to eat." The problem is there are five thousand men. Matthew's Gospel says that there were also women and children (Matt. 14:21). So, let's say there are about ten to fifteen thousand people. The idea that a group of twelve people could feed that large group is preposterous. The twelve only had five loaves and two fish. In Mark's Gospel, the disciples ask if they should buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, which would be two hundred days' wages (Mark 6:37). Let's say that's about \$25,000 in today's money. I doubt the disciples had access to that kind of cash. The point is that it's an impossible situation. Well, it's impossible for the disciples apart from God.

Second, we see that Jesus and his followers are met with opposition. When Jesus sends the twelve out on their mission, he tells them, "wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them." In other words, if you're talking about the kingdom of God and people don't want to hear it, don't waste your time. Shaking off the dust from your feet was like saying, "I don't want anything to do with you, I

don't even want the dust of this crummy town to stay on my feet." Jesus knew that people would reject him and his disciples. He knew his disciples would do well to focus on those who would believe. This suggests that there will always be people who reject the message of Jesus.

But the biggest opposition we see to Jesus is given in three verses in the middle of today's passage. Again, here are verses 7–9:

⁷ Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead, ⁸ by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the prophets of old had risen. ⁹ Herod said, "John I beheaded, but who is this about whom I hear such things?" And he sought to see him.

Herod was the king of Galilee and he was generally not a good man. We already heard about him in Luke 3. John the Baptist, Jesus' relative and the one who proclaimed the coming of the King, confronted Herod because he had married his brother's sister. We were told that Herod had imprisoned John (Luke 3:19–20). Now, we're told that Herod was perplexed by the news of Jesus. There were people saying some pretty wild things. Some had said John the Baptist was raised from the dead. Some said that it was actually the prophet Elijah. There's a prophecy in the Old Testament that Elijah would return to bring people to repentance (Mal. 4:5–6). Elijah doesn't literally return, but John the Baptist fulfilled this prophecy. Perhaps the people realized that someone like Elijah had come, because Jesus did call people to repentance. Others thought that another prophet had come, probably the prophet that Moses had promised would come (Deut. 18:15–19; John 6:14). I don't think they actually believed in some form of reincarnation—that's not the kind of thing Jews believed. But they knew someone special had arrived on the scene.

Herod can't believe what's happening. There was someone else who fit this description: John the Baptist. But Herod says he had John the Baptist beheaded. This is the only mention of John's death that Luke gives us, though you can read more about it in Matthew 14:1–12 and Mark 6:14–29. Obviously, the person the crowds are going on about isn't John. Herod took care of John. So, Herod "sought to see" Jesus.

Verse 9 is so short we can read over it quickly and not think about it. Herod had John the Baptist killed because he was a preacher of righteousness and also because Herod made a terrible promise to his stepdaughter, who asked on behalf of her mother that John's head be served on a platter. Now, Herod wants to see Jesus. That's rather ominous. If Herod had John killed, what

will he do to Jesus? This is a short but strong bit of foreshadowing. Herod will meet Jesus shortly before Jesus' death, though Herod found nothing wrong with Jesus (Luke 23:6–16).

Jesus' disciples were rejected because of their message, but Jesus was killed because of who he was. And Christians today still face rejection and, sometimes, death because of who they are, what they believe, and what they do and do not do.

The third thing we see is that Jesus provides. When Jesus sends out the apostles, he “gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases.” He empowers them to do what he asked them to do. I'm sure that the disciples had to trust that they could do what they were called to do. They might not have felt like they had authority and power. They would only know when they tried to heal people. They had to trust Jesus' instructions about not bringing extra supplies on their trip. They couldn't have known in advance that they would be successful, other than by trusting that Jesus was telling them the truth. And from what we see, they were successful. They preached and they healed in many villages.

Luke spends more time telling us about the results of Jesus' command to feed the masses. Jesus tells the disciples to do something impossible: feed thousands of people with very little food. He instructs them to have the people sit down in groups of fifty. Then he takes their meager bit of food, says a blessing over it, and breaks the bread so that it can be distributed. Somehow, there was enough food for everyone. We're told that “they all ate and were satisfied.” Twelve baskets full of leftovers remain—one for every apostle. This is clearly a miracle, the kind of thing that only can Jesus can provide.

I have heard it said that the miracle was that Jesus got all the people to share their food. In other words, Jesus didn't miraculously multiply a small amount of food. Instead, his act of generosity led everyone else in the crowd to be generous, so that everyone had enough to eat. According to that interpretation, if we would all share what we have, everyone in the world would have enough. Now, that last part is surely true. But it seems that it's clear that Jesus miraculously multiplied the food. Otherwise, the disciples wouldn't have been worried about the people getting food in the first place. And John's Gospel makes it clear that the people were amazed that Jesus could do this and they followed him in order to get more food.

I think there's a reason why these two stories—the going out to proclaim the gospel (the good news of the kingdom of God) and to heal, and the feeding of the masses—are told together. They're related. The feeding of the masses is a sign indicating something more than literally

feeding the hungry. Feeding the hungry is important. We need food to live. But there's more to reality than this life. Whether we have a lot to eat or a little to eat in this life, we will die. We need something that will give us life beyond death. And this is something that only Jesus can provide.

In John's Gospel, after Jesus feeds the masses, they follow him. And Jesus says something very important to them. I want to read this passage, because it sheds light on the meaning of this miracle. So, let's turn to John 6:26–51:

²⁶ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." ²⁸ Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" ²⁹ Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." ³⁰ So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?" ³¹ Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' " ³² Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³ For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. ⁴⁰ For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

⁴¹ So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?" ⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me— ⁴⁶ not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Jesus tells the crowd that the physical bread they are eating doesn't last. You have to eat more each day, just like the Israelites in the Old Testament had to collect the "bread from heaven," manna, every day. You can be well-fed in this life and die eternally. But Jesus is the superior bread from heaven, the one that gives life after death. He says, "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life." And what is this food that endures? "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Jesus is that bread.

How can Jesus be the bread of life? What does that mean? Well, think about this: we need food to eat or we will die. But everything we eat dies in order to feed us. That's certainly true of meat, but it's also true of plants. For bread to be made, grain has to die. The result is that we live. Jesus is the God-man, the Son of God who also became a human being. And his body was broken on the cross, an instrument of torture and death, so that we could live. The cross was used to punish criminals, enemies of the Roman Empire. Though Jesus had done nothing wrong—he is the only person who has never sinned—he was treated like a criminal. That happened so that we, who have sinned against God, can go free. His body was broken, and he died so that we could have life.

This story of blessing and breaking bread foreshadows the last supper Jesus had with his disciples. On the eve of his death, Jesus ate a Passover meal with his disciples. At that meal, he took the bread and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). He took the cup of wine and said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). He said it was "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). God's covenant, his pact with his people, demands perfect obedience, which none of us possess. Jesus is the only perfectly obedient one. And God's covenant demands that sin must be punished. Jesus paid the penalty for our rebellion against God, our failure to love him and live for him the way that we should.

But Jesus' death only covers the sins of those who come to him as the bread of life. How can we partake of this spiritual food? Jesus said that we must do the work of God, and he defines that for us: "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." We must trust Jesus. We must believe that he is the Son of God who became a human being, who lived a perfect life and died an atoning death. But we must not just trust that certain facts about him are

true. We must trust him, which means we must follow him. We don't earn a right standing with God through our obedience. We receive a right standing by faith. But real faith leads to doing what God wants us to do. We do this out of love and gratitude, not in an effort to earn something from God or manipulate him to do what we want.

And that leads me to the question that I always ask: what does this have to do with us? What should we learn from this passage?

God has called us to do the impossible. He has called us to turn from our sin and put our faith in his Son. Apart from God providing for us, we could not do this. The human heart is so corrupted, so confused and deceitful and divided and fickle, that we could not love God properly unless he gave us the power to do that. In a passage about salvation that comes up later in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27).

God has called us to be his witnesses. Now, we're not all apostles. Jesus has not commanded us to go to every town and heal the sick. We're not all called to travel with no supplies—though I'm sure many of us could travel far more lightly, by having a lot fewer possessions. But we should all be witnesses to Jesus, wherever we are. And that can feel like an impossible task. It might feel impossible because it's hard to talk about Jesus. People aren't thinking about eternal life. They're thinking about politics, the bills they have to pay, the things that they have to do today, and perhaps the Super Bowl. But people generally don't spend a lot of time thinking about the meaning of life, what happens after death, if there's a God and what he's like, and how we can be right with God. We live in a very trivial culture, where the big questions of life are suppressed and ignored. So, when we talk about Jesus, people may think we're crazy.

And when we do talk about Jesus, people may very well reject us. We could lose friends. People may say angry and hateful things to us. They may listen politely while inwardly rolling their eyes at us. Or, they may believe. We trust that God still does the impossible, opening up people's eyes to see the truth, causing people to be born again so that they can enter the kingdom of God.

Like Jesus and his disciples, Christians today experience opposition. We see increased opposition in this country, but nothing like what Christians in other parts of the world experience. I think of the Christians in China. There are millions of Christians in China. It's possible that there are more true Christians there than in the United States. China is a Communist country, and they have churches that are officially recognized by the state. But there is pressure

to compromise beliefs in order to be part of the state-recognized church, so there's a large number of unofficial churches. Recently, the government has been cracking down on these churches, removing crosses from their buildings, having them fly the Chinese flag and sing patriotic songs, and even barring minors from attending.

The government is producing its own version of the Bible, with a new translation and notes that will highlight commonalities between Christianity and Communism. Bibles can't be purchased online in China, so the government is trying to keep "unofficial" versions of the Bible out of the hands of its citizens.

Lately, the government has been shutting down the unofficial churches, including one in the city of Chengdu called Early Rain Covenant Church. The pastor and his wife, along with about a hundred others, were arrested in December.² As far as I understand, the pastor and his wife are still detained. The church continued to meet, though they were evicted from their building. I saw video of them meeting in a park. I'm sure they are trusting that God will provide for them, even if they should be imprisoned. The government can take away a building, bread, and life, but they can't take away the bread of life and eternal life.

Opposition to Jesus and his people has existed from the beginning, but it can never defeat Christianity. I am reminded of a passage from C. S. Lewis's great book, *Mere Christianity*:

Again and again it [the world] has thought Christianity was dying, dying by persecutions from without and corruptions from within, by the rise of Mohammedanism [Islam], the rise of the physical sciences, the rise of great anti-Christian revolutionary movements. But every time the world has been disappointed. Its first disappointment was over the crucifixion. The Man came to life again. In a sense—and I quite realise how frightfully unfair it must seem to them—that has been happening ever since. They keep on killing the thing that He started: and each time, just as they are patting down the earth on its grave, they suddenly hear that it is still alive and has even broken out in some new place. No wonder they hate us.³

Jesus calls us to do the impossible, and we are opposed by evil forces—forces from without and even forces from within as we continue to battle our own sin. But Jesus also provides. Do you believe that? Do you trust Jesus so much that you obey him, even when it looks like what he's asking you to do is impossible?

² Information about what's happening in China can be found in Lily Kuo, "In China, They're Closing Churches, Jailing Pastors – and Even Rewriting Scripture," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible>.

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 222.

If you're a Christian, I want to ask you this: what is it that you are doing in your life for Jesus that seems impossible? In other words, what is it about your life that demonstrates that you trust Jesus? What hard tasks are you doing simply because you are a Christian? It might be being very generous with your money even though you don't know what will happen financially this week, this month, or this year. Instead of stockpiling all kinds of finances, we're supposed to trust that our Father will provide our daily bread. So, we give to the church and we give to the poor. You might consider giving to a ministry like the Voice of the Martyrs, which helps persecuted Christians.

Trusting Jesus might mean sharing the gospel with people, even if you don't know how they'll react. Actually, it means talking about Jesus when you don't know how people will react. If you do this, you may lose a friend. Or, you may gain a brother or sister in Christ. Trusting Jesus might mean staying married even though it's hard, or raising your children in a Christian way even though the world around you says to do something else. Our lives should reveal how we're trusting in Jesus.

Christians should care about both preaching the gospel and feeding the masses. I once heard John Piper, while he was still a pastor, talk about how his church viewed "ministries of mercy," basically giving to the needy. He said his church was committed to alleviating suffering, so they did have ministries that helped the poor. But he said his church viewed eternal suffering as of far greater importance. If you care about suffering people, give them literal bread, give them money. But also give them the bread that gives eternal life, the kind of bread that can't be bought with money but can only be received by faith. Christianity only makes sense if it's viewed in light of eternity. Christianity is not about ending suffering in this life, which is truly impossible. But it is about ending the suffering of those who come to faith in Jesus.

If you're not a Christian, I urge you to turn to Jesus. There is a life after this life, and it will either be one of infinite joy or infinite suffering. The only one who can give you eternal, abundant life is Jesus. I invite you to have a right relationship with him. That means that he is who the Bible says he is, that he has done what the Bible says he has done, and that his path for your life is better than any you could ever come up with. If you don't know Jesus, or if you're not truly trusting him, I urge you to turn to him now.