

## ***Grow up: Compelled by compassion and confidence***

Lessons: **Jeremiah 17:7-8; Matthew 15:32-38**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Jeremiah%2017:7-8;%20Matthew%2015:32-38>

Let's talk a bit about the African impala. This beautiful antelope stands a bit under 3 feet at the shoulder, and is about 4-1/2 to 5 feet long. That means it's around the size of a Great Dane. The impala is one of the smaller antelopes, but it is quite nimble. It can jump to a height of 10 feet, and its broad jump can cover 30 feet. That's 10 yards in one leap.

Yet, even though the impala is quick, and can jump very high and very far, the impala can be kept caged with nothing more than a mere 3-foot fence surrounding its pen. The impala, which is physically able and accustomed to leaping 10 feet high, will not go over a 3 foot wall. Why? Because the impala will not jump when it cannot see where it will land. If the impala cannot see what is on the other side of its jump, it will stay right where it is.

The impala will stay in its little tiny pen even if a lion is in there with it, or if it is hungry and there is food on the other side. The impala will not leap when it cannot see the outcome of its action.

For comparison's sake, consider a housecat — our cat, Jamba. Jamba is maybe 8 inches high at the shoulder, and Jamba regularly jumps 4 times his height onto a 7-inch ledge overhanging the 20 foot drop into our living room below. He cannot see the top of the ledge when he jumps, which means he cannot see where he will land. The first time he jumped onto that ledge he had no idea how wide it was, nor did he know (or seem to care) that on the other side of the ledge was a 20-foot drop.

Our housecat could not care less whether he can see the outcome of his jump. He trusts that he will land where he needs to. Yet, the impala will not leap over a 3-foot wall in order to save his own life.

How many impalas do we have in the room today? How many of us will not take a leap unless we can see where we will land?

You've heard the phrase "a leap of faith"? Being able to leap simply means having confidence that you'll land where you need to.

To follow Jesus, you have to practice having faith that God will land you where you need to be. Faith isn't about knowing everything, or it all making sense. Faith is having the confidence in God that you'll land where you need to be.

Did that story from Matthew sound really familiar? Jesus has been out among the people, teaching and healing. He stops for a moment, and looks at the crowd. Looking at them, Jesus experiences compassion. Around here, we refer to compassion as heartbreak.

So Jesus looks at the crowd, and his heart breaks. The crowds have been with him three days, and they have not eaten. He wants to send them on their way. Jesus wants the crowds to go on and take what he has taught them into living their lives. But Jesus knows that if he sends them away hungry, some of them won't make it where they need to go.

If the crowds of people leave hungry for food, they'll faint. If you faint of hunger in the desert, you might not make it home.

If the crowds leave still hungry for an experience of God, they will faint. They'll grow weary of following the Way of Jesus. The psalmist wrote that the ones who have trust in the Lord have roots in God that sustain them, so that in droughts of the soul they do not cease to bear fruit. But these very new followers

of the Way of Jesus have no roots in God — they need to be spiritually fed, like infants, before they set off on their own.

So Jesus looks at the crowd, sees their hunger for food and their hunger for God, and Jesus feels his heart break. He doesn't want to send them away physically hungry, and he doesn't want them to leave without being spiritually fed. But if they never go, they'll never grow. And Jesus wants the crowds of followers to grow. He wants all of them to grow.

The Lord tells his main men all this — he tells the disciples that his heart breaks for the crowds are hungry and he can't send them home without feeding them. The disciples look around. What do they see? Crowds of people starving for God and food. They see a world of need. And they see desert: a lot of nothing but rocks and stones. The disciples see no bread of any kind.

So the disciples say to Jesus, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" And what they're thinking is, "there is a world of need here. How can he want us to feed this many people? We don't have what we need to do that. All we have is a bunch of stones."

Jesus' disciples are thinking, "We don't have what we need to do what you are asking of us, Jesus." And every one of them is thinking, "I cannot feed all these people. I simply do not have it in me."

Jesus looks at the great crowds and is moved by compassion to feed them.

His disciples look at the crowds and immediately think, "There is no way I can do this. I do not have it in me."

I spoke earlier about cats and impalas — impalas get stuck because they can't see where they will land. The disciples are like impalas. All they can see is the barrier, so they do not leap.

At this point, with the disciples hopeless and defeated before they even begin, Jesus could just do it himself. Jesus could turn all those stones of the desert into bread enough to feed the crowds. Earlier in Matthew, chapter 4, the Tempter tells Jesus to do just that — to turn all the stones of desert into bread. Jesus refused then, and he doesn't do it now.

Jesus is mighty and awesome, and Jesus is nobody's fool. He knows that if the disciples do not go and serve themselves, they will not grow. The disciples need to grow up in order to be his friends, in order to do his work. If Jesus simply turns the stones to bread, what do the disciples learn? That Jesus could do miracles? They already know that. The disciples already know that Jesus can do just about anything.

What the disciples need to know is that whatever they have been given is enough to do what Jesus would have them do. The disciples need to learn that the barrier is no barrier for God — that if God is asking them to leap, God will land them where they need to be.

If Jesus tells them to feed the people, whatever they have is enough to do it. And if Jesus simply turned all the stones to bread, they would never learn that. If Jesus just kept doing miracles, his disciples would never grow up.

Here's the truth, my brothers and sisters. Jesus isn't only moved by compassion for the hungry crowds. Jesus is moved by compassion for his disciples — for you and me. None of us just needs to be fed. We don't just need to have full bellies. We don't just need to get a little jolt of Jesus. We don't just need to feel good. If we come to Jesus just to feel better, to get spoon fed Jesus joy, we remain spiritual infants.

But the Lord Jesus is no fool. He knows that we don't just need to be fed, physically and spiritually. He knows we don't just need to grow wide in our welcome and deep in our godliness. Jesus knows we need to grow up. As human beings, in order to become the people we have been created to be, in order to

grow, we need to have compassion for others and the confidence that when we leap in faithful action, we will land where we need to land.

To be the whole and holy people you and I were created to be, we need to grow up, and gain confidence in both the power of God and the gifts God has given us.

So instead of turning stones to bread, Jesus, moved by compassion for both the crowd and for his disciples, asks them: "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven" they reply. "And a few small fish," they remember to add. So Jesus asks the great crowd to just sit down.

And then Jesus took the disciples' bread — Jesus took what they had offered, which was everything they had — and after giving thanks to God he broke it and gave it to the crowds. He thanked God for what the disciples had and he thanked God for what they had been given.

And it turned out that what they had been given was enough. More than enough, for the scripture tells us that everyone in the crowd was filled, body and soul, and there were seven baskets of bread left over.

Most of us disciples start out as impalas: we need to see where we are going; we need to see where we will land when we leap. As spiritual impalas, we are trapped by little obstacles in our way because we can't see where we're going to wind up. We don't trust Jesus very much, and we certainly don't trust him to help us land where we need to. Spiritual impalas have no real faith in God, because faith is just the confidence that God will land you where you need to be.

As spiritual impalas, we grossly underestimate our own value and gifts. We look at what we have — what we are, what our gifts are — and instead of seeing the abundance of skill and talent and resources we've been given, we look out at the world of need, and feel like whatever we have to offer is just a pile of stones in the desert.

Growing up means gaining a realistic view of your own gifts and abilities — and thanking God for them, and inviting God to be actively involved in how you use them. When you have compassion for others — for both their physical needs and their spiritual needs — and confidence that God has provided what you need to do what Jesus calls you to do, you can do miracles.

Jesus works through his disciples to transform the world. Jesus is working through you to feed the world. When you practice compassion, when you let your heart break, you look at the crowd and see their spiritual and physical need without fear. When you practice confidence in God and in God's gifts to you, you see bread instead of stones. When you worship God, accept what God has given you, and give it back to God's use, you grow. And others are fed.

The crowd needs to be fed, spiritually and physically. But no one needs to live hungry, because everyone can be fed on the real bread of life that is Jesus. And what you have — your bread and fish — that make it possible.

Being able to leap just means having confidence that you'll land where you need to. When we leap out of compassion and confidence, we are enough and we have enough to do what Jesus asks us to do.

Together, we are enough and we have enough to do the miracles of love Jesus asks us to do. Let us leap together, and trust that God will land us where we need to be. Let's grow up together, and feed the hungry world the real bread of real life.