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John 6:60-71

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LOVE HIM OR LEAVE HIM

I love words. I'm a very verbal person, a holdover from another time. Today, modern technology trains people to be more visually oriented. When they want to share something with someone, they take a photo with a cell phone or send an e-mail with a digital photo attached. Although I would not call myself a literature buff or a wordsmith, words mean a great deal to me. I remember and contemplate lines from movies, books, poems, songs and conversations. Words and combinations of words are beautiful and delightful to me. A picture may be worth a thousand words, but a few finely crafted phrases that stimulate my imagination and help me visualize a picture in my mind's eye are a powerful emotional force.

Jesus was a master with words. His powerful utterances always evoked emotion among his hearers. This is what we begin to see at the conclusion of chapter 6 of John's gospel—how people responded to the words of Jesus. John 6 describes a new exodus and a new Passover. Moses fed the people of God with manna from heaven when they were delivered from Egypt; in John 6, Jesus supernaturally feeds bread to the multitude. Moses took the people through the Red Sea on dry ground; Jesus takes the disciples safely through the Sea of Galilee, and he himself walks on water. Jesus is the new Moses, the leader of a new exodus.

At Capernaum, Jesus gives a lengthy teaching, telling the Galilean crowd that not only does God give bread from heaven, but that he himself is the bread of life, the new manna. He declares that his body is true food and his blood true drink. He is the new Passover meal, the new covenant feast for the people of God, and they must eat his flesh and drink his blood.

These powerful words were very confusing to the crowd gathered at Capernaum that day. Jesus' statements evoked a strong reaction. If someone stood up in our midst and spoke similarly, we would have a strong reaction as well. We would think him mad. Our text identifies three groups of people and their responses to Jesus.

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some of you who do not believe."

For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. And He was saying, "For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father." As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore. (John 6:59-66 NASB)

The first group consists of disciples, a much larger number than the twelve. They have three problems with what Jesus is saying. First, they complain that it is a "difficult statement," or literally, a "hard word." They do not mean difficult to understand, but harsh, offensive or strong. James uses the same word to describe powerful winds (James 3:4). In Jude 15, this word may be translated as "words that cause pain," or idiomatically as "words that are like daggers." Jesus' word is sharp and penetrating.

These "difficult" words of Jesus had to do with his earlier statement about eating his flesh and drinking his blood:

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him." (6:53-56)

The disciples found this word hard for several reasons. To them, the notion of eating and drinking was offensive. They were only interested in food and miracles, not spiritual realities. They were offended at the claims Jesus made to be greater than Moses. They were not ready to give up their traditions.

The second problem was that they were whining and complaining. Notice that they "grumbled" at his words. This was how the people responded to Moses and Aaron at the first exodus:

Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the LORD's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into

this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.”
(Exod 16:1-3)

Because Jesus had supernatural knowledge, and knew the hearts of men (2:24), he was aware that the disciples were grumbling. His words were causing them to stumble, literally; they were a “scandal.” Jesus is the Word of God, and he speaks the word of God. This was a scandal to the disciples. They did not want to change. In the first exodus, the people wanted to return to Egypt. In the new exodus, the disciples didn’t want to leave Torah and Moses.

Jesus responds by asking them, “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before?” He was drawing on Daniel 7:

**“I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”** (Dan 7:13-14)

Jesus is saying that if eating and drinking are offensive to the disciples, what will they do with the cross, the crucifixion of an alleged Messiah, and the ascension? The cross will be a lot more scandalous than the word he spoke about eating and drinking. “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending?” he asks. The way people responded would decide their destiny.

Third, these disciples did not truly believe, and so they departed from Jesus. This pattern of unbelief comes as no surprise to him. He knew the hearts of men. He even knew the one who would betray him. Jesus was going toward his God-appointed task with his eyes wide open. There are believers and unbelievers within the circle of disciples. Jesus’ words cause division, because the cross is a scandal for some.

Jesus knows that believing is a divine work. Unless the Father draws them they cannot come to him. Here Jesus reiterates what he has already said. There must be a prior work of the Spirit before one responds and believes. Coming to faith is never finally a matter of autonomous human decision. Many of those who followed Jesus do not believe, and so they decide to abandon him utterly.

Hard words, grumbling hearts, unbelieving spirits: Jesus’ words are hard because they call for a radical commitment. The disciples grumble because they don’t want to change. They don’t believe because the Father isn’t drawing them.

When Jesus talks about “eating his flesh,” he is referring to a radical commitment to a radical idea. He is claiming to be a prophet greater than Moses, who fulfills the Torah. People must give their lives completely to Jesus. Eating and drinking means that we give him all of our heart, all of our life, and we abide in him. This is a scandal and a stumbling block to many. What these disciples wanted Jesus would not give. What Jesus offered they would not receive.

Change is difficult. As a boy I was an avid baseball player. Our family moved when I was 13, and I never played baseball again. The adjustment to new schools, new friends and new surroundings was overwhelming to me. But change can be a great adventure. It is good for us because it stretches us. However, leaving something we know to enter into something unknown is hard for us. We fail to make changes that can be good for us because we are afraid. It is hard for us to leave the world in which we are comfortable to enter into the kingdom of God. We want to go back to Egypt. It is even more difficult for us to leave religion and tradition to fully enter into the life of Jesus. We want to go back to Torah, to external rule-keeping.

I recall the process I went through when I became a Christian. I didn’t like what was happening to me. I wanted life, but I wanted Jesus on my terms. I wanted to know the cost, what I would have to give up. At last I realized I didn’t have anything worth keeping. I also remember the tremendous tension I felt when I was baptized. Earlier, I had been baptized as an infant in the church where I grew up. I felt that taking a personal step of faith was a rejection of the religion my parents had tried to give me.

Over the years I have seen several people come to the place of almost giving their lives to Christ and then walking away. This happened with several of my co-workers when I was employed as an engineer. After many hours of conversation and debate, people would tell me that what I was saying was probably true. They said they wished they had something to believe in like I did. One young man asked me if I had peace, and when I answered in the affirmative, he said he didn’t have peace. But he walked away. After a lengthy debate long into the morning hours, another man commented that I had won the debate. Actually, God had won. But the man didn’t want to give up his life.

Some people begin to follow Jesus and seem to want to give their lives to him. They start attending church and Bible study, but God doesn’t seem to come through the way they expected. They have a difficult time accepting what the Bible says about marriage, or predestination, or suffering. They have a hard time connecting in the church, or they don’t like the people they find there. So they stop coming, or go to a church that offers what they want—a palatable, bite-sized version of Jesus.

Some of us keep attending church but in our hearts we aren’t really present. We continue to rely on our own understanding and effort. We hide behind religious respectability. We might

be dying on the inside, but we refuse to get the help we need because the cost seems too high. We don't want to give up the life we have even though we are miserable. We don't tell our real story. We don't go for counseling. We keep pretending and masquerading and trying to work things out on our own. And all the while we whine and grumble that God is not being faithful to us, that he is not giving us what we want. So we walk away from God internally, even though externally we seem to be living the Christian life.

In the center of this little section we find the thing that will help us get over the fear of letting go of what we know and giving ourselves to Jesus:

“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” (6:63)

Spirit and life—this is what Jesus is talking about. He gives the Spirit, and the Spirit gives life. The flesh is of no benefit.

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (6:53-54)

This is what God promised in the O.T., that one day he would pour out his Spirit and this would change people's hearts and give them life. This is what Ezekiel saw in his vision of the valley of dry bones:

Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. ‘I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.’” (Ezek 37:5-6)

“I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,” declares the LORD. (Ezek 37:14)

Jesus is not talking about actually eating his flesh. The flesh does not benefit. He is talking about eating and chewing on and digesting him to the point that we derive the nutrients from what he gives. That is spirit and life. If you want life there is only one way to get it. It is only by the Spirit. And there is only one way to get the Spirit, and that is by eating and drinking Jesus.

No matter how much you are able to do in your own strength, effort and understanding, you will not have life. Human effort is futile, even if it is religious effort. When we focus on the flesh, we miss the significance of Jesus. The world is not offensive, neither is religion, but radical commitment to Jesus is. The only way to have life is to live on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God; and now we live on the word of Jesus who is the living Word. We must eat that Word to have life.

Jesus goes on to ask the twelve if they want to leave him too:

So Jesus said to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life. We have believed and have come to know that You are the Holy One of God.” Jesus answered them, “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, and yet one of you is a devil?” Now He meant Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray Him. (6:67-71)

Jesus' question is more for their sake than his. They need to articulate a response more than he needs to hear it. Peter speaks up first, naturally. His response is similar to his confession at Caesarea Philippi, recorded in Matthew and Mark. Replying to Jesus, he asks the wonderful question, “To whom shall we go?” He doesn't like everything Jesus does, and doesn't understand everything he says. But he knows one thing for sure: his words are spirit and life. He has watched Jesus and listened to him. He has believed, and as a result he has come to know Jesus to be the “Holy One of God.” This is the same title given to Jesus by the man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:24).

Peter's word is probably a bit pretentious. Perhaps he regarded himself as superior to the disciples who had departed. Jesus reminds him that the twelve have not left him because he chose them. Peter speaks better than he knows. Later he will learn what it means to follow Jesus. But Peter is not going to quit. Here we see a second response to Jesus. True believers hang in there with him, even when things get hard, even when others are jumping ship. Their commitment is real and lasting and permanent.

We also see a third response in the person of Judas. There are those who are defectors, those who are determined, and those who are in the camp of Judas. We see that Jesus even chose Judas, whom he calls “a devil.” Judas isn't literally the devil. He has become a child of Satan, and therefore reflects the image of his father. Each one of us reflects someone's image.

Even within the church there are people like Judas. They neither leave nor truly follow. They are self-centered and are trying to use God and others to their own ends. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. They act like Christians and talk like Christians, but in reality their father is the devil, and they are committed to destruction.

We might ask ourselves this morning to which group do we belong? Are we going to love Jesus or leave him? There is nothing in between. Jesus doesn't offer just a part of himself. He isn't just an appetizer. He is the meal. He is meat and wine. It is his body and blood or nothing. Hopefully, we can say with Peter, “To whom shall we go? There is no other place to go for spirit and life. No matter how difficult it gets, I'm not going to quit.”

Liz and I have been married just over 30 years. When we met, we were crazy in love, or in lust, or something. We were young, immature and self-centered. We were not really

grounded in our faith, although we would have said that we knew most everything. Her father tried to talk us out of getting married. We probably should not have gotten married. If I had been counseling us, I would probably not have married us!

As we began our marriage it was a hard time for both of us. Liz was very strong-willed; I was very demanding. We grumbled and argued, and sometimes spoke hurtful words. Each of us wondered if we had made a mistake. We never talked about the issues and we never sought help (although there wasn't a lot of help available in those days). I'm not sure why we stayed together. Maybe it was because we were Christians. Maybe it was because our parents didn't get divorced. Maybe it was our stubborn pride, or a hope that one day things would get better. Or maybe it was because we had given our word, made a vow, and we weren't going to quit no matter what.

All I can tell you now is that it has been worth it. Where else would we have gone? Had we quit, I'm sure our lives would have been a disaster. We never would have tasted the sweetness we have come to know. "I in you, and you in me," said Jesus.

Last year we took a vacation to celebrate 30 years of marriage. We were like two kids again, off to see the world. We are more in love now than the day we got married.

This is how it is with the Christian life. We are married to Christ, and we are filled with excitement. Miracles seem to happen daily. But then things get hard. We are told to die to ourselves, to love our enemies, to trust God completely. We don't understand everything and we make mistakes, just like Peter. Some days we feel like quitting. But if we hang in there and become more and more real, if we keep eating and drinking, we find a sweetness that makes it all worthwhile. We taste spirit and life. This is what we want, and this is what Jesus offers. There is no one else to whom we can go.

It is fitting that as we end this chapter on the bread of life we come to the Lord's Table. We remember Jesus and we eat his flesh and drink his blood. This is an outward sign of an inward grace. We remember his death and the life that is imparted to us as a result. His body was broken, his blood shed. As we eat his flesh and drink his blood we have spirit and life: forgiveness for sin, a removal of guilt, and the strength and power to rise up and live as he would want us to live.

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