

To Whom Shall We Go? John 6:52-71
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This is the 5th and final sermon I'll be preaching from John 6. We've come to the end of this long and wonderful chapter in the Gospel of John. Jesus feeds the 5,000. He walks on water. He proclaims Himself to be the bread of life. He highlights the Father's role in drawing people to Him. He also emphasizes the free offer that whoever comes will have eternal life, will never be cast out, will be raised on the last day. There is a lot of profound truth contained in this great chapter. There's a lot of encouragement for our souls here.

As we come to the conclusion of this chapter, we might feel like it ends on a big downer. Just compare the beginning of the chapter with the ending of the chapter. It starts with a massive crowd following Him, and He miraculously feeds them all with a boy's lunch. He multiplies the bread and the fish so that these 20,000 folks eat their fill and the disciples pick up 12 baskets full of leftovers.

The crowds continue to follow Him for a time, but now at the end of the chapter who's left? Just the 12. And then we find out not even the 12 are going to last. One of them is a devil who will betray Jesus.

The chapter begins with thousands following Jesus. The chapter ends with only 11 who realize that they have no other place to go. I hope this morning we will all find ourselves in the company of those 11. I hope our confession will be like that of Peter's in verse 68, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God."

Do you realize this, brothers and sisters, that many will turn away . . . like the larger group of disciples who chose not to follow Jesus anymore because of His hard teachings. Others, like Judas, will betray Jesus even after seeming to be so very close to Him.

This is a somber passage in some ways. But it's for our good that it's included here. It's meant as a warning to us, not to be like the disciples who deserted, and not to be like Judas. It's also an encouragement to us to humble ourselves and recognize what Peter voices here. Sure, Jesus has some hard teachings. But what's the alternative? Where else would we go? Who else would we follow? We're not going to get everything figured out. And not everything Jesus says is going to sit well with us, especially at first. Oh, but how wonderful it is to know that we're chosen, to know that we belong to Him, to know His loving care for us, to know of His sacrificial death for us, His blood shed for our sins, to

know that the Father has given us to the Son, drawn us to the Son, and that we will be raised on the last day, that we will never be cast out, and that we will spend forever in heaven with Him. That is such Good News! What could compel us to turn our backs on Him?

We'll look at 3 things in this passage. First, the offense of Jesus. Second, the confession of Peter. Third, the betrayal of Judas.

The Offense of Jesus (verses 52-59)

It's not only Jesus' graphic language here about eating flesh and drinking blood that the people find offensive. That, of course, is offensive. It sounds like cannibalism if you just take it in a woodenly literal way. Jesus says at the end of verse 51, "And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." And then the Jews objected, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" But instead of making the teaching easier to accept, He makes it harder to accept. He makes it even more odd-sounding and offensive.

I'm not sure all His reasons for doing this. But it strikes me as similar to His purpose in the parables. As Jesus said to His disciples in Mark 4, in the midst of the parable of the soils, He told them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven" (Mark 4:11-12, verse 12 quoting from Isaiah 6).

When Jesus speaks here of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, He knows that many will be offended by this and will turn away as a result. And this again highlights the need for new birth. There needs to be a supernatural work of the Spirit to give insight and understanding to Jesus' words.

For us, we can understand that Jesus is reiterating the same themes He has been expounding earlier in the chapter. Remember the repeated free offer that is made, which we were looking at last Sunday. Verse 35, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." Verse 37, "All that the Father give me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out." Verse 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." Verse 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."

What is the point? What is the significance of the bread illustration? What is the significance of the eating illustration?

The point is . . . Jesus is the bread. And eating the bread is coming to Him, believing in Him. That's the point! As Augustine wrote, "Believe, and you have eaten."

And what Jesus begins to describe in verse 51 and then further in verses 53-58 is that He is giving Himself sacrificially for the world, for all those who will partake of Him. What's new in verses 53 and following is the mention of blood. Jesus' blood is hugely important, of course. For it signifies His death. Remember what Jesus said at the Passover with His disciples as He was instituting the Lord's Supper. This is in Luke 22:20, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." What Jesus is describing there is at the very heart of the Gospel. It's the Good News that He died in our place. This is what the Passover foreshadowed, and it is what Jesus fulfilled in His death on the cross. The wrath of God against sin was poured out on Jesus, His blood was shed, so that we can be forgiven.

Now, I have to say something about the Lord's Supper in relation to John 6, because Roman Catholic theologians will use this passage to support the teaching of transubstantiation, the idea that the bread and wine are actually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus as the priest consecrates it. And they would point to this passage and say, Look, Jesus is telling us very literally to eat of His flesh and drink of His blood. And that's what we're doing in the Eucharist.

What we need to realize is that Jesus' statements here in John 6 are not meant to describe the Lord's Supper directly. The Lord's Supper will come later on, at the end of His earthly ministry. At that point He describes the significance of that meal. Here in John 6 it's the bread of life discourse. It's the first of 7 "I am" statements. He's describing a spiritual reality in the language of common human experience.

Here are a couple helpful sentences I read this week on this matter. One commentator says, "John 6 is not about the Lord's Supper; rather, the Lord's Supper is about what is described in John 6."¹ And Don Carson says, similarly, "John 6 does not directly speak of the eucharist; it does expose the true meaning of the Lord's supper as clearly as any passage in Scripture."²

I had to put my thinking cap on and mull that over a bit. The point is, Jesus isn't giving us a woodenly literal description of

¹ Carson quoting Colin Brown. Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 280). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

² Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (p. 298). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

the Lord's Supper in John 6. That's not the context. That's not the focus of His teaching there. What He is teaching about is the all-satisfying gift He offers, which is Himself. He is offering Himself, sacrificing Himself, His own flesh, His own blood, for those who will trust in Him, who will come to Him, who will believe in Him, and who will therefore inherit eternal life. That's what this passage in John 6 is about. And then, later, when He institutes the Lord's Supper, we learn that the Lord's Supper is about that reality. The Lord's Supper is about Jesus sacrificing Himself for us. And as we partake of the Lord's Supper it's a tangible reminder and celebration of His sacrifice.

So John 6 is not giving us direct teaching about the Lord's Supper. But it does describe the same spiritual reality which the Lord's Supper points to. I hope that makes sense. Again, what we're guarding against is a woodenly literal interpretation of John 6 which would lead us to believe that the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper are actually transformed into the body and blood of Jesus. That's missing the point.

That was a bit of tangent, but a necessary one. Returning now to the point about the offense of Jesus, we can ask the question, what else about Jesus' teaching is offensive here? Obviously, the eating flesh, drinking blood language is offensive. But what else? Earlier, in verse 41, we see the Jews grumbling because Jesus said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." And now in verse 52 the Jews are disputing among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And then verse 60, many of the disciples are saying, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" And then in verse 66 "many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him."

James Montgomery Boice summarizes 3 aspects of Jesus' teaching in this chapter which His listeners would have found to be hard teachings, and still today people find these to be hard teachings.³

First, the teaching about Christ's incarnation. Jesus speaks of Himself as the bread that came down from heaven (vv. 33, 38, 51), which implies that He existed beforehand. He is divine, eternal. This is a wonderful truth, but impossible to accept apart from regeneration. We're not naturally inclined to accept a truth such as this.

Second, Jesus' teaching that He would go to the cross, that He would give Himself, give His flesh, His blood, for the life of the world. Think about how humbling it is—humiliating, really—to admit that I need that. I need Jesus' sacrifice on my behalf.

³ Boice, *John*, page 452.

Why? Because I have sinned that badly against a holy God. This, too, is a hard teaching.

Thirdly, there is the teaching I spent much of last week's sermon unpacking—the harsh reality of human inability and human unwillingness. We are unable and unwilling to come to Jesus. And the only thing that will change that is the Father drawing us. Jesus said it in verse 44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Jesus says it again in our passage this morning, in verse 65, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” And this, also, is a difficult teaching and often-times offensive.

But listen, brothers and sisters, we should be very suspicious of teachings that appeal to our natural, normal way of thinking. We should expect that the Bible is going to challenge many of our presuppositions. We should expect to be challenged, stretched, humbled, by the Word of God.

Charles Spurgeon says this, “There are many points and particulars in which the gospel is offensive to human nature and revolting to the pride of the creature. It was not intended to please man. How can we attribute such a purpose to God? Why should he devise a gospel to suit the whims of our poor fallen human nature? He intended to save men, but he never intended to gratify their depraved tastes. Rather doth he lay the axe to the root of the tree and cut down human pride.”⁴

So, yes, indeed, much of Jesus' teaching is difficult to accept, even offensive. But what else would we expect? If you watched the show, “This Is Us” this week, you remember the scene in the hospital when Randall's biological father is dying. Randall is talking to the doctor and telling the doctor his plans to get his dad back home. But the doctor says, You wanted me to be honest with you, and I'm telling you, his organs are failing, he only has a matter of hours to live, he's not leaving this hospital. That's not what Randall wanted to hear. Those words stung. But it was the truth, and he needed to hear it.

Many of Jesus' words will not be what we want to hear. His words will sting. But it's the truth, and we need to hear it. It's for our good, for our eternal salvation. And this is what Peter recognizes and professes so wonderfully in verse 68.

The Confession of Peter (verses 60-70)

Peter doesn't say, Oh I find all your teachings easy to understand and easy to accept. He doesn't say that. In many

⁴ Spurgeon, C. H. (1904). A Mournful Defection. In *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Vol. 50, p. 602). London: Passmore & Alabaster.

respects, Peter is in the same boat as many of those who walked away. Peter certainly has his struggles.

In fact, in the Gospel of Mark where Peter makes his famous confession, saying to Jesus, “You are the Christ,” just a few verses after that Peter gets a harsh rebuke from Jesus. Why? Because Peter objected to the idea of Jesus suffering and being killed. Jesus was saying these things about suffering and rejection and death, and Peter tried to rebuke Jesus. But then Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Peter certainly had his struggles. He didn’t grasp all that was going on. But the beauty of his confession here in John 6 is that he realizes how desperate he is and how unique and precious Jesus’ words are.

There’s a scene in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, by John Bunyan, where Christian is faced with the fierce enemy Apollyon. Christian was scared, and he began to debate in his mind whether he should turn and flee. But he reconsidered, remembering that he didn’t have any armor for his back. If he turned back, the enemy would have a clear target. So he resolved to stand fast and face him, to press forward.

That’s a good thing for us to realize. Think about the armor we’ve been given: breastplate, shield, helmet, sword. These are for engaging in battle, for pressing forward. They’re not for turning around and running scared, which just opens you up to the enemy’s attacks.

Peter recognizes, I may be scared to press forward. I admit, some of what Jesus says is confusing, even offensive. But what other options do I have? Turning around, running away, is not going to be any better. It would be much worse!

Think about your own life. Think about the challenges you face as a Christian. You may think about the people in the office who look down on you because of your Christian convictions. You may think about the family members who are awkward around you because of your faith. You may think about the struggle it is to remain pure, the struggle to resist temptation, the burden it sometimes seems to be to read your Bible and pray, the time commitment it is to be in fellowship with other believers. And you may sometimes think, It would be easier just to live like the world. The devil may whisper that in your ear. Just turn back to your life before Christ. Wasn’t that more fun? Wasn’t that easier?

But don’t, for a second, believe those lies. Sure, it may be easier in some respects to live as an unbeliever. Just like it would be easier to turn around and run scared rather than engaging in battle. But what would the result be? The result would be

destruction. You would be slain by the enemy. Easier, maybe. But perilous. Why would you do that? Think about it, we have a master who is also the triumphant King. No one can defeat Him. And while it may often be difficult to follow Him, who better to follow?

Do you believe this about Jesus? Do you confess this today? Do you see Him as the One who has the words of eternal life, as the Holy One of God? Have you tasted and seen that the Lord is good? Have you tasted the sweetness of His words? Have you experienced the comfort and security of His promises? Have you benefitted from the protection of His warnings?

Do you embrace the glorious truth that Jesus Christ, the 2nd person of the Trinity, took on flesh and lived among sinful humanity and then died and rose again to save sinners like us? That's the wonderful news of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Do you have eyes to see how amazing this is? I pray that you do. And if you don't, I pray that you will be granted spiritual sight, even in this moment. I pray that you will see and delight in Jesus the Messiah, our Savior.

The Betrayal of Judas (verses 64, 70, 71)

The betrayal is mentioned three times here. In verse 64, Jesus knew who it was who would betray Him. Verse 70, And yet one of you is a devil. Verse 71, "He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him."

What an astounding thing that Judas could spend 3 years in such close company with Jesus, and then definitively turn on Him in the end. He had been with Jesus, travelled with Jesus, heard Jesus teach, watched Jesus perform miracles. He had observed first-hand the kindness and compassion of Jesus toward so many.

But he would heartlessly turn Jesus over to be killed. This is betrayal at its worst. Judas did not deserve any of Jesus' kindness throughout the three years he was with Him, and Jesus certainly did not deserve any of Judas' treachery.

What can we learn from Judas' betrayal? Why was it God's plan for it to happen like this? It could have happened in some other way that wouldn't involve one of the twelve being a betrayer. There's something God intends for us to see in this, a spiritual truth that is both troubling and also tremendously important for us to understand. It's the disturbing truth that there are men and women who might appear to be very close to Jesus, very close to the Bible, very close to the church, and yet they are not truly devoted to Jesus. This is what blows our minds when we think about Judas. None of the other disciples even suspected Judas. He must have been a pretty decent disciple. There weren't any major red flags that made anyone else think that he might do

something like this. That's why when Jesus predicted that one of them was going to betray Him, none of them had a clue who He might be talking about. It's not as though they all immediately suspected Judas. In fact, at the Passover with His disciples when Jesus made a similar statement, when He said, "one of you will betray me," they all said, "Is it I?" (Mark 14:19). So Judas apparently fit right in. He appeared to be on board. But he is the one to betray Jesus.

One of the sad realities of this fallen world is that such individuals will be mixed in among God's people all the way until the end. In 2 Corinthians 11 Paul writes about false apostles, and he says that they are "deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15, ESV)

This is a scary thing, and we need to be aware of it. We need to be watchful. We need to be on guard against such false apostles, false teachers who would creep in among us and claim to be so devoted to Jesus. And they may, in many respects, really appear to be devoted to Jesus. That's why all this can be so confusing. The false apostles or false teachers don't walk in with a sign on them that says "I'm here to deceive you." No, just like Judas, there is the appearance of a commitment to Jesus. But one's long term actions will show the true fruit of what is in the heart.

So I exhort us, church, to be on guard. Unfortunately, just because someone says they love Jesus, we can't assume that it's true. Just because someone says they love the Bible doesn't mean they have truly submitted to its teaching. We need to be discerning and prayerful, and we need to watch out for one another and for this flock, lest any be led astray.

We must also guard our own hearts and minds lest we become a deserter or a betrayer. Spurgeon had some interesting advice about books. He said if you start reading a book that ends up being troubling to your soul, don't feel like you have to finish it. Just put it down. He says if you take a bite of bad meat, you're not going to feel obligated to finish the rest of the bad meat just to prove that it's bad. Once you know it's bad, you put it down. [Now, regarding books, don't take this advice as closed-minded or anti-intellectual. Certainly there's a place for reading things from other perspectives and engaging non-Christian worldviews.] But if you're reading something that is more confusing than helpful or more troubling than edifying, maybe you should put that down. At least talk to some trusted, mature believers about it.

And another thing to beware of . . . beware of departing from the church. Beware of thinking that you can live the

Christian life independent of a local church, disconnected from a local body of believers, without being committed and accountable to a church. Each of us needs this accountability. We can't just float around from church to church, going when we want to and doing other things when we want to. We need to be here together, singing together and studying God's Word together, celebrating the Lord's Supper together, praying together, and in smaller settings, too, sharing with one another about the ups and downs of life, carrying one another's burdens. Don't think for a minute that you can go it alone.

Examine your heart to see what could potentially leave you susceptible to attack. What are the things that could be eroding your faith, undermining your faith? And make sure you're pressing closer and closer to Jesus and closer and closer to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's pray for God's grace to preserve us and protect us, lest any of us become a deserter or a Judas.

Judas continued to feign allegiance to Jesus even in the moment of betrayal. He betrayed Jesus with a kiss. How low can you get? Judas planned it out this way. He gave this as a sign to the others. And then he approached Jesus with the appearance of respect and honor and affection, calling Him, "Rabbi," and then kissing him. I pray that none of us will be a Judas. But this is a warning we need to hear.

Beware of being a betrayer. Beware of being a false disciple. Don't turn back! Keep pressing on!

I'll conclude with a question and a comfort.

Question

The question is for each of us to ask of ourselves. And the question is, Am I a Peter or a Judas? Am I a disciple who will press on with Jesus, or a deserting disciple who turns back? And remember that the difference between these two is not what you might think. It's not that Peter had it all together, had everything figured out, always did the right thing. Not at all! Peter was stumbling through this thing as much as anyone. But, by God's grace, he was willing to keep stumbling in the right direction rather than turning around to go back. It is the evidence of the Spirit's work in Peter's life that he confessed, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life . . ." May this be our confession as well.

Comfort

And then lastly, to close with this comforting observation from our text. Notice Jesus' foreknowledge in this and His determination to continue on the path that was set out for Him. He

knew He was going to be betrayed, and who it was who would betray Him. If you follow the church calendar and observe Lent in some way, whatever else you may do during Lent, be thinking of Jesus with His eyes wide-open, with full knowledge of what was going to happen, walking day after day toward the cross.

Jesus knew exactly where He was going. He knew He was going to the cross. He could foresee the excruciating pain, physically and emotionally and relationally. Imagine Jesus, day after day, being kind to Judas, knowing that a day was coming soon when Judas would betray Him with a kiss. Wow! That's our Savior. And He endured all of that pain for us. What an incredible gift! Who else would we want to follow than Him?