

“The Spirit and the Word”

John 6:60-71

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60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) 65 And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”

66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” 70 Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” 71 He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him. – John 6:60-71, ESV

Introduction: What Offends You?

“I’m offended.” These two words have, in many ways, become the cry of our generation. If I disagree with something you say and it hurts my feelings, I say, “I’m offended,” and that means that you need to change both your language and the underlying opinion that offends me. I have a right not to be offended, and reality must conform itself to my desire not to have my feelings hurt or to be told that I am wrong in anything that I think or in any way that I choose to behave.

People didn’t just start being offended by things they don’t like in our generation, though. Our human nature makes us react against anything that would challenge or undermine our deep desire to be our own sovereign. Throughout John 6, we see the crowd around Jesus grow increasingly irritated with Him when He refuses to conform to their desires.

The beginning of this tension between Jesus and the crowd is back in verse 15: *“Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”* In this first case, it was Jesus who withdrew.

Then, after Jesus and the crowd are reunited at the synagogue in Capernaum, they start challenging and questioning Him and grumbling at His responses. They first openly challenge Him in verse 30: *“So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”*

After Jesus tells them that He is Bread of Life, the true bread from heaven, they grumble in verse 41: *So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”* This grumbling continues and intensifies into a dispute in verse 52: *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”*

Finally, from questioning and challenging to grumbling and disputing, they begin to reject Him and His words in verses 60-61: *“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this?’ They don’t even want to listen to what Jesus is saying. Jesus knows they are offended.*

Here’s what we need to see, though: They are not offended because they do not understand what Jesus is saying, but because they do. While Jesus has pushed the limits of acceptable imagery for a Jewish audience by talking about eating flesh and drinking blood, they are more offended by who Jesus claims to be and by what He has said about their need for Him than they are by any confusion over His language. As Samuel Clemens (better known by his pen name, “Mark Twain”) once famously said, *“It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”*

A. Hearing the Words without the Spirit, vv. 60-65

Jesus responds to this mounting rejection of His teaching at first by challenging the crowd and then by clarifying His meaning, in verses 61-63: *“But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.’”*

The first part of what Jesus says is a challenge to the crowd over who He is and where He is from. The heart of the grumbling, disputing and offense of the crowd comes from the fact that Jesus has claimed to be the true bread from heaven. They thought they knew Him and where He was from and who His parents were. They were not prepared to accept that He is far greater than they ever imagined or that they needed Him in a far deeper and more personal way than they had believed. If He had said, “I am the Messiah. Follow me and we will overthrow Rome and secure our freedom,” they would have taken up arms and marched behind Him, even if it meant death, especially if He fed them miraculously every day.

They were not prepared for Him to say, “I have come down from heaven to give my flesh for the life of the world, and unless you believe in me, you have no life in you.” That was more personal, more penetrating, more challenging and more deeply offensive. To put it in another vernacular, they could have said, “Now Jesus, you done quit preaching and started meddlin’”

To challenge them back, Jesus asks how they would respond if they saw Him ascend back to heaven. Would they then respond in faith or would they be even more deeply offended? Would their objections be put in their place and would they finally believe, or would they simply harden themselves and still refuse to believe in Him?

After He challenges the crowd, Jesus then clarifies to make sure they have not misunderstood Him. He says, *“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”* This verse both clarifies and further challenges these offended disciples. It clarifies that Jesus was not literally telling them to eat His flesh and drink His blood, He’s been using earthy flesh talk to describe spiritual realities.

But these words that clarify also challenge: The flesh is no help at all. We want the flesh to be of some help because we think we can manage the flesh. The crowd had earlier asked, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus had responded by calling for faith, which is something the flesh cannot produce but only the Spirit can give. They are offended because Jesus won’t just give them a list of things to do, tasks to be

accomplished, disciplines to be embraced, hardships to endure. None of this would help at all. The Spirit gives life; the flesh is no help at all.

The words of Jesus are spirit and life. As they are accepted and believed, we receive true, eternal, spiritual life. But it is the Spirit who prepares us to receive the things of the Spirit. As the Apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 2:14: *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

Jesus is not done yet, though. He goes on to say: *“But there are some of you who do not believe.”* (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.”* (vv. 64-65)

Jesus shows that He knows their hearts when He tells them that some of them don’t believe. But He doesn’t stop there. He goes on to tell them again why it is that some of them don’t believe – *“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father.”* This is now the third time Jesus has repeated this same core truth in this chapter:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” – v. 37

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.” – v. 44

“no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father” – v. 65

And notice what happens now: With this third statement of the truth that salvation is God’s work and is impossible apart from Him, we get a mass exodus of so-called disciples: *“After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’”* (vv. 66-67)

Jesus has now successfully driven away almost all of His disciples, and He has reduced His following from 5,000 men down to 12. For those of you keeping score, that’s an attrition rate of 99.76% He’s down to .24% of His original crowd, and then He turns to this small band and asks, “Do you want to go away as well?”

Doesn’t Jesus know anything about church planting? He started off the chapter doing okay. He was meeting felt needs and He had a crowd of 5,000 men plus their families. Now that’s a mega-church. Then He starts preaching the Gospel and telling the truth and he’s left with 12. This is never going to work! How does He expect to start a worldwide movement with such insane tactics?

Jesus isn’t relying on the flesh. He’s entirely dependent on the Spirit. He could win a large following with free bread and an impressive magic show, but He knows that no one can truly come to Him unless it is granted by the Father. He knows that all whom the Father gives Him will come to Him.

B. Hearing the Word by the Spirit, vv. 66-70a

As he usually does, Peter speaks up for the rest of the twelve. He says: “Go? Go where?” Peter doesn’t say, “We like what you’re saying.” Or “We agree with You, Jesus.” Or “Nah, we’ll stick around for now. We’re not ready to decide quite yet.” No, he confesses, *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”*

Peter gets it. He understands. He may not always agree with what Jesus says. He may not always understand what Jesus says. Peter sometimes even argues with Jesus. But he knows he cannot go anywhere else. Jesus alone has the words of eternal life!

As followers of Jesus today, we need to ask ourselves whether this is our confession. Do we know and believe that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life? If we do, then where else can we go? Where else would we go? Sadly, we often go anywhere else but to Jesus – looking to entertainment or social media or the latest advice from the talking heads. So often, we fill the voids in our lives with the empty, dead chatter of the fallen and Christ-rejecting world and we do not go to Jesus, who has the words of eternal life.

And why is it that Jesus has the words of eternal life? The second half of Peter's confession explains it, in verse 69: "*and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*" Peter knows that Jesus has the words of eternal life because he has believed and he has come to know that Jesus is indeed the Holy One of God. Because of who Jesus is, His words are the words of eternal life.

But how did Peter come to know this? It does seem like he might be boasting just a little bit about what he has believed and what he has come to know, doesn't it? Well, if Peter is boasting or tempted to boast, Jesus speaks clearly to him: "*Did I not choose you, the twelve?*"

Peter's faith is commendable, but it doesn't ultimately come from Peter. Peter has been given by the Father to the Son, and so the Son has chosen him and will not cast him out. Peter has come to faith in Christ and knowledge of who He is because God has drawn him, and not because he was clever enough or good enough or patient enough or devout enough to see the truth for himself. He has been chosen.

C. And Yet . . . (vv. 70b-71)

And yet . . . These two words introduce a very sobering conclusion to the end of this chapter: "*And yet one of you is a devil.*" *He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.*"

We find out from these words that the followers of Jesus have not been reduced from 5,000 to 12, but all the way down to 11. Why did John end this section of his Gospel with this downer? It will be a year before Judas betrays Jesus, and yet Jesus already sees what no one else sees yet, that Judas is a devil. This reinforces the central truth of the chapter, that God is sovereign over all.

Whether people are believing in Jesus, rejecting Jesus or betraying Jesus, God is sovereign over all. This is the key, central lesson of John 6. We saw it at the beginning of the chapter when Jesus set up the feeding of the 5,000 in the wilderness on the mountain. We saw it when He walked on the water and then immediately transported His disciples to the shore, after they had struggled all night. We saw it when the crowds came to question Him and He took Psalm 78:24, which they quoted to Him, and used it as the basis for His discourse explaining who He is as the bread of life, the true bread from heaven. We saw this truth repeated throughout the Bread of Life discourse and at the end, when the crowd rejected His teaching and walked away. And now we see it at the end with Jesus' identification of one of His closest twelve, hand-picked disciples as a devil. The disciples don't know who Jesus means, but He does, for He is the Lord and knows all.

Conclusion: Jesus Knew from the Beginning

Earlier, in the second half of verse 64, John had included a parenthetical aside, in case somehow we could read this chapter and still miss this central truth. He said, “*(For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.)*” So, Jesus chose His disciples, and He also knew from the beginning who did not believe and who it was who would betray Him.

This perfect knowledge of Jesus should be a great comfort to us. Whether the crowds are gathering by the thousands looking for a miracle or walking away, shaking their heads in disbelief, Jesus knew it all from the beginning. Nothing ever takes Him by surprise. Sometimes it might look like everything is going very well and is working just the way it should. At other times, it can feel like the wheels are falling off the bus and nothing at all is going right. But whether people come to Jesus, people walk away from Jesus or people betray Jesus, He knew it all from the beginning.

If we learn anything from John 6, let it be these central truths:

1. *Our satisfaction and salvation can be found only in Jesus, the true bread from heaven, the bread of life.*
2. *We must truly believe in Jesus – receive Him and rest upon Him, eat and drink Him with our souls – if we are to have satisfaction and salvation.*
3. *Our coming to Jesus and believing in Him is entirely dependent on the grace of God, the One who gives us to Jesus and draws us to trust in Him.*
4. *Our staying in Jesus is entirely secured by the purpose of God and the commitment of Christ, who has promised never to cast us out and to raise us up on the last day.*
5. *Everything that happens – no matter how it appears to us – was known by Jesus from the beginning and is ordained by God according to His wisdom and for His purposes. God is sovereign over all!*

If we know and believe these central truths, then indeed where else could we desire to go? Jesus alone is the Holy One of God, the One who has the words of eternal life, the One who saves and keeps us, the One who satisfies and secures us. We are His. Let us go to Him!