
Hard Words

John 6:60-71

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Just because something is hard to understand, does that make it untrue? Do you only believe what you can explain?

Light...

Nuclear physics...

Genuine love between a husband and wife...

What do we do then when Christian people seem to be talking excitedly about stuff that seems strange and hard?

The Trinity...

The Incarnation...

The resurrection...

Well, this text is about hard words that Jesus says. What has kicked off this text?

Jesus was interacting with the Jewish people who were following him. They were more concerned with having a king who had unlimited storehouses of bread.

Jesus challenged them on multiple levels. Finally, he exposes their unbelief through His teaching on being the bread of life.

Verses 51-59 is this beautiful and very difficult analogy of Jesus' being true bread and true drink. Whoever eats and drinks of Jesus lives and will be raised on the last day. So, Jesus is portrayed as satisfying and sustaining through faith.

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."

⁵² The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" ⁵³ 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 you. ⁵⁴ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵ For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

Many things in Christianity can only be understood through analogies. Faith in Christ actually allows us to partake of the vitality and virtues of Christ. I cannot explain it, only repeat and explain a bit the metaphor Jesus uses.

But the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day weren't the only ones struggling with this. Let's listen in on two conversations Jesus has.

False Disciples Question Jesus about His Teaching**(v. 60-66)**

The first group Jesus talks to are His disciples, His followers.

Exposed in a Question**(v. 60)**

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

Just as there is a kind of belief in Jesus that does not save, there are followers of Jesus who are not saved. This becomes evident through this text.

Some of his followers challenge Jesus, "Why do you have to be so harsh⁸?" Why do you have to keep introducing these hard and controversial ideas? Why can't you keep it simple? Why can't you be more gentle and easy with people who need to believe? Why not explain yourself in such a way that most people will be inclined to believe? It seems like you are intentionally making it hard for people to believe in you.

How do I know that this is not a simple, curious, informational question? Look at what follows.

Examined by an Answer**(v. 61-63)**

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.

So, some of those who were disciples, followers of Jesus *were grumbling and complaining just like the unbelieving Jews*. The unbelieving Jews were looking for a benevolent king who was able to provide their every need. These followers were looking for a benevolent teacher who was kind, gentle and easy to everyone around him. Jesus simply was not fitting into their categories and they appear to be unwilling to adjust their categories.

If they are offended by this teaching what are they going to do when He is lifted up and ascends to heaven, where He came from. This is a rich play on words. In the gospel of John this ascended is "lifted-up" meaning the cross. If they thought eating Jesus was bad, what are they going to think about Jesus's criminal execution? This picks up on the "lift-up and look on" earlier in the chapter. And Jesus and John use this phrase to refer to Jesus' ascension into heaven. What will they think about a benevolent king and teacher then? After He is gone, will the offense be taken away as well? Will they be OK with Jesus if he is no longer around messing up their categories?

Real life is not going to come through the flesh, through the physical realm. It will do no good. It is the Spirit who imparts spiritual life. Jesus' words are spirit and life. For us now John is saying, "God's Word is Spirit and life." So, let's think about that for a moment.

The Word and Spirit are closely joined in the Bible. You cannot have the Spirit without the Word. The Word is how the Spirit is given. God's speech and God's Spirit come together into the life of the soul and give life to the soul. Careful then when you are seeking the Spirit outside the Word of God. He is not there. He comes through Jesus. He comes through the Word. We are made alive by the Word and the Spirit (John 3:5-6; 1 Peter 1:20-25)

Bread and drink are material items. When we eat them, our body converts them into what is needed for our body to be strengthened and sustained. Along with it, we have a sense of being satisfied when we have eaten. In the same way, when we believe God's Words, our soul converts it into what is needed for strength and sustenance.

But if I feed bread and drink to a corpse, what happens? Does it take it in? Does it come to life? No, nothing happens. Is the bread and drink bad? No, there is nothing wrong with the food. Everything is wrong with the corpse.

So then how does the dead soul come to life? By the giving of the Spirit through the Word of God. The person hears the Word. God sends His Spirit into the soul to quicken the soul. The soul that is now born from above, repents of sin and turns to God, believes the Word and all the rest of Christ's work is then applied to the person.

Now that the soul lives, the Words of God that come in by faith satisfy, strengthen and sustain the soul. Jesus is then sustains and satisfies our soul. According to 2 Peter 1:3-12, we take this in by faith in God's promises.

I cannot say it any better than D.A. Carson:

It is hard not to see in the last clause an allusion to Jeremiah 15:16, where the prophet addresses God: 'When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight' (*cf.* also Ezekiel. 2:8-3:3; Revelation. 10:9ff.). In short, Jeremiah's assessment of God's words is the same as Jesus' assessment of his own words. One cannot feed on Christ without feeding on Christ's words, for truly believing Jesus cannot be separated from truly believing Jesus' words (5:46-47). Human beings live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy. 8:3). The identical claim is now made for the words of Jesus, precisely because he is the Word incarnate (1:1-18; *cf.* 5:19-30).⁹

Explained by an Assertion

(v. 64-65)

Jesus explains why what is going on. Look at two assertions Jesus makes.

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."

Some of those who were following Jesus did not believe. In other words, there will be people who will appear to be disciples who do not really believe. Many in the crowd are unconverted. This is no surprise to Jesus. He knew all along that there would be followers who would not believe and a disciple who would betray him. So there will be people in the crowd who are unconverted. What about you? Are you becoming uncomfortable with this? Is it possible that you are following Jesus but do not believe? Do you understand that you must believe what Jesus says or you are not a true disciple?

No one can believe except by the grace of the Father. It is actually worded stronger than this. It is not possible to come to Jesus in a saving way unless it is allowed or granted by the Father. To our ears this sounds harsh and hard. Who can listen to such a statement? Aren't you just eliminating man's responsibility? No, I am simply saying what Jesus is saying. Those of you who truly have come to Jesus and believed in Him have done so because of God the Father. God commands people to believe. God condemns those who do not. God grants belief to those He will. It does not depend upon your decision but upon God's grace and grant.

Expressed in a Response**(v. 66)**

Those false disciples now express their unbelief openly.

⁶⁶ After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

“Forget you,” they say with their feet. This is a decisive abandonment of following after Jesus. Because Jesus has not removed the offense of truth, they will go somewhere else. F. F. Bruce said, “What they wanted, He was not willing to give; what He gave, they were unwilling to receive.”

True Disciples Trust Jesus for the Truth**(v. 67-71)**

Listen to the challenge of the next verse.

⁶⁷ So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?”

Challenged in a Question**(v. 67)**

Jesus turns to the Twelve. Now we know that the disciples mentioned above are a larger group of followers. With the defection of the crowd, Jesus turns to those whom He has chosen to be His disciples. He challenges them with a question. The context will not allow a pathetic, plaintive question. He is not turning away in disappointment as the crowd leaves. He looks at the Twelve with knowing and flinty eyes. “So what about you? You going to join them?”

Notice how this is addressed as a “want” question. What do they want? Do they want easy words, soft truths, softball answers? Do they want Jesus to tone it down? What they want flows out of what they believe. That will be abundantly clear in their answer.

I think we need to take a challenge like this to heart. What Jesus says we are to believe. What Jesus says we are to learn and understand. What Jesus says we are to tell and teach. Why do you think Jesus does this with the disciples at this point? Why do you think John wrote this text to the church so many years later?

I am well aware that this is being preached in a morning service where we have guests, seekers and new believers. Frankly, the truth here is not hard to understand; it is just hard to swallow. Many of you are sitting here having been misled by religious charlatans and false teachers. You know that you have been told all kinds of lies. So here is the truth. Clear. Unvarnished. Laid out there. You know what the choice is. If you want to be a disciple, if you want to believe in Jesus, then here is the truth. What are you going to do with it?

Confirmed with an Affirmation**(v. 68-69)**

It is not that Jesus needs their response for Himself. Rather, the true disciples need to affirm for themselves. So Peter speaks up for them all, maybe.

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.”

Great response. Where are we going to go to get the truth? What is the alternative? What or who else is out there? It is even bigger than that. The defectors may go somewhere else. But their unbelief is going to cut them off from the only source of what they truly need. But coming to Jesus means:

Receiving what Jesus brings - Only he has the words of life. Only He has the words that will give life. Life is what they need more than anything else. Jesus’ Word is what they need to give that life. Jesus’ Word is what they need to sustain life. Walk away and you walk

away from life. But eat and drink of the Word of God, the Lord Jesus, the Scriptures and you have life.

Believing Who Jesus is – They have come to believe and to know. These are inseparably connected. Saving belief acknowledges what God says about Jesus Christ. That is sense of the word, “know”. Peter, and all who will be true disciples, believe and affirm that Jesus is who He says He is. He is Holy One of God. Saving belief affirms that Jesus is God, Holy as God is and sent from the Holy Father.

Those who will not believe Jesus’ words, those who will not affirm that Jesus is God, do not have the life that comes by the Spirit through the Word. But all who truly do come to Jesus, all who truly believe in Jesus, partake of His life through the Spirit.

Corrected by a Reminder

(v. 70-71)

But be careful. Even such affirmations can be loaded with pride and pretension. So, Jesus corrects them with a reminder.

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.

Well, not all of you. One of you is a devil. Again, this is not meant to be taken literally but rather descriptively. A solid affirmation of Jesus’ divinity, when accompanied by pride and posturing, smells more of hell than heaven.

Now look, at the time Jesus says this to them, imagine the shock! What, one of us is Satanic?! No way. We are the true disciples. We have not deserted you. We are all loyal, sacrificial, suffering, sticking-with-you-Jesus men. Yet the guy to whom they entrusted the money turned out to be the betrayer.

But at the time that John wrote this, the story has already unfolded. Just so people would know who might not have the other gospels, John notes that the betrayer was Judas Iscariot.

What to make of this? Jesus, doing the Father’s will, chooses and calls someone to His inner circle who is not a believer. In concert with other texts, it means no less than there will be unbelievers even among the called to the leadership of God’s people.

So what is called from us is belief and humility. Yes, Jesus is Redeemer and Ruler. He is food and drink to the believing soul. Yes, believe and affirm that. But when you do, acknowledge that you are utterly dependent on God to grant what is required. Humble belief is saving belief.

Reflect and Respond

So where are you in all this?

Are you the kind of person who will only believe what he understands?

Do you only want your Christianity to be simple, digestible, easy?

Where do you find yourself in this text?

Are you one of the crowd who seeks Jesus to get your felt needs met?

Are you one of the followers who doesn't like hard and deep truths and will go somewhere else?

Are you one of the true disciples who humbly believe and acknowledge who Jesus is and what He gives?

Are one of the inner circle entrusted with leadership yet hiding unbelief and growing discontent with what God has granted?

What DO you believe about Jesus?

⁸ The idea here is not that it is hard to understand, necessarily. Their word here "hard" could be translated "harsh". It is the Greek word, *skleros*.

⁹ Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991. P.302.