

A HARD TEACHING
John 6:52-69

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
March 10, 2019

Introduction

The Reverend Thane Ford succeeded in providing what many church members cherish most—a guarantee to get out by noon. In fact, you can be home by noon. This pastor of the First American Baptist Church of Pensacola, Florida, created the “Compact Mini 22-Minute Worship Service.” In just 1,320 seconds, Ford delivers an eight-minute sermon, leads in the singing of one hymn, reads Scripture, and has a prayer. His logic is this: “It’s for people whose parents made them go to church all their lives, and they thought they had all the church they could stand. Or, it’s a good entry-level church for people to see if they can take religion in smaller doses.”

It may be a creative way to reach the unchurched, but what kind of message does this “non-commitment” service send to the world?

There is, indeed, a real temptation for the church—especially in Western cultures—to try to lighten the load for would-be followers of Christ. Despite Jesus’ high demands for discipleship, we want to make it “easy” to follow him. We certainly should not be surprised that a culture which has lite mayo, no-fat sundaes, and “sweatless” exercise should also want easy discipleship. We want “lite Christianity”—a gospel that has grace, but no judgment; forgiveness, but no repentance; church membership, but no baptism; and heaven, but, please, no hell. Lite church would have everything you want in a church...and less. Before we sell our soul to dumb down discipleship, we must first read this passage where hard words come from the very lips of our Lord.

Background

There is no way to understand the end of chapter 6 outside of its contextual setting. To focus only on the end of chapter 6 (vs. 52-69) would be the equivalent of viewing only the last 15 minutes of a two-hour block-buster movie. We could not fully understand the characters’ words without the context clues discovered in the first three-quarters of the Hollywood hit. Therefore, let’s briefly summarize the setting in chapter 6.

Feeding Five Thousand (6:1-15)

The miracle of feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle—besides the resurrection itself—that is recorded in all four Gospels. This opening story sets the scene whereby we realize that fallen humanity did not even know for what it was hungry. Jesus comes into the world being a host, in order to provide God’s people with the one true food that satisfies the soul’s longing for intimacy with God.

Upon crossing the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and his disciples arrive at “the mountain” (v. 3). The mention of “the mountain” is most likely an allusion to a scene of Moses at Mt. Sinai, which will

be, once again, referenced in verse 31-33. We also learn that it is Passover time. The season reminds us of the first Passover when God liberated his people from slavery and fed them “bread from heaven” during the wilderness wanderings (Exodus 16). In John 6, we have a new Moses (Jesus), a new Exodus (freedom from death), and a new “bread from heaven”—Jesus himself.

Testing Philip, Jesus inquires as to how they might possibly buy bread for such a large gathering. Philip is stumped, confessing that a half year’s salary would not even provide enough money to feed this multitude.

Andrew, however, has located a lad with five barley loaves and two fish. But even Andrew realizes that the little lunch of the lad is completely insufficient when there are so many mouths to feed.

With unwavering authority, Jesus instructs the disciples to prepare for serving the meal by seating the crowd. Taking the bread and fish, Jesus gives thanks to God and then provides the people with an “all you can eat” affair.

In verse 14, we see that John presents this act as a “sign”—the fourth in this Gospel (see 2:11; 4:54; 6:2 for the first three signs). The signs in John’s Gospel serve to point men to God. Rather than seeing God, however, these men only saw the possibility of Jesus being “the prophet.” In Deuteronomy 18:15, the people were told to expect a prophet who would be the greatest one of all. Earlier, in 1:20-21, John the Baptist had insisted that he was neither the Messiah nor “the prophet.” This prophet was to be a second Moses, who would lead God’s people out of slavery.

As usual, the men tried to remake the Messiah to meet their own expectations. With fierce nationalistic longings and looking for a leader who could revolt against Rome, they are prepared to make Jesus king (v. 15). As another Gospel attests, however, the prospect of an earthly kingdom was nothing more than a temptation of the devil, and Jesus would decisively reject it (Luke 4:5-8).

Avoiding the king-makers, Jesus slips away into solitude. In seeking to force Jesus to be the kind of king they want, they miss the true kingdom he offers.

Walking on Water (6:16-21)

In a most brief account, John relates a story also found in Matthew 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-52. The climax of this account occurs in verse 20, where Jesus says, “It is I.” These words give the reader a hint of deity, that Jesus is like the God “I AM” of Exodus 3.

Bread out of Heaven (6:22-40)

This section contains Jesus’ discourse on the bread of life. The same crowd that had completely misunderstood Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the 5,000 seeks him again for their own purposes. Though they could not comprehend how Jesus had crossed the sea without a boat, they were glad to find him when they reached Capernaum. Almost immediately, Jesus gets to the meat of the matter, “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give you...” (v. 27). Jesus’ reference to spiritual food, as opposed to physical, reminds us of his conversation with the woman at the well. He tried to get her to focus on “a well of water springing up to eternal life” rather than the water in the well (4:14).

Since Jesus presents himself as the “sent” one (v. 29), the crowd asked him to confirm his claims by showing them a sign. This demand must be understood against the background of a Jewish expectation that when the Messiah finally arrived, he would renew Moses’ miracle of providing manna. Having just recently had their stomachs filled by the miraculous feeding, the multitude is ready for a permanent supply of manna. Jesus, however, is trying to get the people to see beyond their stomachs—to see that he is the true bread of life.

In verse 35, we have the very first “I am” saying of John’s Gospel. These unique pronouncements in John’s Gospel have clear overtones of divinity. The words echo Exodus 3, where God informs Moses, “‘I AM WHO I AM’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14).

Each time Jesus says “I am...” in John’s Gospel, he reveals an important piece about his person and his ministry. By saying “I am the bread of life,” Jesus is revealing that he himself is the real food, the only true spiritual nourishment that sustains life forever. Showing his unique relationship and harmony with the Father, Jesus states seven times in this chapter that he has, in fact, come down from heaven (verses 33, 38, 41, 42, 50, 51, 58). Likewise, he makes clear that he is the one who will raise up those who are God’s on the last day (verses 40, 44, 54). The salvation Christ brings is no untouchable hope. Ultimately and finally, Jesus has a sure grip on his followers and will physically raise them up into God’s kingdom on the last day.

Words to the Jews (6:41-51)

The Jews respond negatively to Jesus’ assertion to be the true bread which has come down out of heaven. Jesus’ words were neither what the crowd expected nor wanted. These Jews, like their forefathers, were rejecting God’s messenger, God’s agent, and, therefore, actually rejecting God himself. As one commentator put it, with their grumbling they preserved the genuine succession of unbelief. They assert that Jesus did not come down from heaven but, in fact, was the son of Joseph (v. 42). Like Moses rebuking the children of Israel for their grumbling (Exodus 16:7-8), Jesus, likewise, calls upon them to cease their carping (v. 43).

In verses 48-50, Jesus restates his clear claim to be “the bread of life.” Unlike their fathers who ate manna in the wilderness and died (v. 49), those who partake of the “bread of life” will eat, but not die. “Believing in” Jesus and “coming to” him (verses 35, 37, 44, 47) are now captured with the imagery of eating.

Most shockingly, Jesus claims, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (v. 51). The language “came down” is in the aorist tense, pointing to a single act in history—the incarnation (1:14). Likewise, the verb “eat” is in the same tense and refers to the act of accepting Christ. Any man who takes the decisive action to accept the Christ who came down in the incarnation will live forever. Speaking bluntly, Jesus refers to his “flesh,” a clear reference to his coming crucifixion on Calvary.

Eating Flesh and Drinking Blood (6:52-59)

Like their forefathers, who not only “grumbled” (Exodus 16:2), but also “argued” with Moses, putting God to the test (Exodus 17:2), the Jews spar with Jesus in order to test him. Rather than retreat, Jesus reasserts his shocking statement, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves...” (v. 53-54).

Jesus could hardly have been clearer. Those who do not eat and drink the Son of Man have no life. Obviously, Jesus is not making a reference to cannibalism, but using a metaphor by which to communicate that men must take Christ into their innermost being. By using the ideas of flesh and blood, moreover, he is foreshadowing his death on the cross. Flesh and blood separate at the point of death. If the Jews had been offended before, they are even more so now, for the Jews were explicitly forbidden to eat blood (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17).

As we partake in the death of Christ, we partake in the eternal life that his sacrifice brings. Again, we find another reference to being raised up “on the last day.” While there are certainly some present tense aspects to eternal life, the climax of that life is found, indeed, in being raised to life on the last day (v. 54).

While the Lord’s Supper had not yet been instituted, this passage is clearly an allusion to eating the bread and drinking the cup. The emphasis is not the elements themselves, but looking beyond the Lord’s Table to the work of God in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. Unlike the fathers who ate manna in the wilderness and died (v. 49), the true food found in Christ, and in Christ alone, provides us with eternal life (v. 55-57).

Moving beyond the metaphor and indicating the true nature of intimacy, Jesus finally says, “The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in Me, and I in him” (v. 56). To eat his flesh and to drink his blood is to possess a mutual indwelling that occurs in the fellowship between the Messiah and the redeemed. The use of the term “remain” is interesting, because it serves as a central theme of this Gospel. We learn that (1) the Father remains in the son (14:10); (2) the Spirit remains upon Jesus (1:32-33); and (3) believers remain in Christ and he in them (15:4). The message of “eating and drinking” is now understood to indicate great intimacy—taking Christ within us.

Just as Jesus is the “living bread” (v. 51), the Father is now described as “the living Father” (v. 57). While Christ has direct access to the Father, believers receive life only as mediated through the Son.

Put plainly, Jesus offers the Jews real food and real life. By rejecting the offer of “flesh” and “blood,” the Jews are rejecting God himself. This conversation, John at last informs us, took place during worship at a synagogue in Capernaum (v. 59).

Words to the Disciples (6:60-71)

At last, Jesus turns to his disciples and speaks, even as he had spoken to the Jews. Throughout the early ministry of Jesus, folks flocked around him. Some were simply curious, seeking to see a miracle. Others were ready for full devotion, leaving friends and family behind to follow him. When John tells us Jesus is speaking to his “disciples,” he is indicating an audience much larger

than the twelve. Having heard Jesus' demand for full allegiance and intimacy, so much so as it could be described as eating his flesh and drinking his blood, his disciples object, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" (v. 60).

The problem is not so much that it is "hard" to understand, but, rather, it is hard to accept. Mark Twain once said it wasn't the parts of the Bible that he didn't understand that bothered him, but, rather, the parts of the Bible that he did understand! The disciples are feeling the same. Discipleship is now understood in terms of full intimacy and devotion. As Jesus sees his disciples grumbling just as the Jews had grumbled (compare verse 41 with verse 61), he addresses their hesitation, "Does this cause you to stumble?"

If the disciples actually see the Son of Man ascending to the glory where he was before, would they then be convinced? When they see the Christ ascend, they will know that "eating and drinking" are spiritual phenomena to be interpreted in light of Jesus' glorified status (v. 62). This idea of ascending, moreover, must also include the thought of the cross. In fact, John's previous reference to Christ's ascending (3:13) is a clear reference to the Son of Man being lifted up at Calvary (3:14).

Jesus indicates that his words cannot be understood by a "fleshly man," but, rather, only by one who is spiritual (v. 63). Despite the fact that the words of Christ bring life, there are some who will reject him (v. 64). In fact, John used this opportunity to let us know that Jesus has always known who will actually believe him and who will reject him.

We are reminded again that salvation is completely authored by God. It is, indeed, impossible to come to Christ without the Father's giving us the grace to do so (v. 65).

Having heard the hard words of the Christ (v. 66), many of the disciples cease to follow him. They were seeking an earthly liberator, a messianic king, and were not so interested in the demanding intimacy with Christ that was required to bring eternal life. The requirements were just too much for them. When a disciple no longer walks with his rabbi, the disciple has officially resigned from both the messenger and his message. Having had hard conversations with both the Jews and the greater group of disciples, Jesus now turns specifically to the twelve and inquires, "You do not want to leave also, do you?" (v. 67). Despite the fact that the sayings of Jesus were hard for them, too, Simon Peter correctly observes that there is no one else to turn to, nowhere else to go. Jesus himself is the only one who has the words and way to eternal life. They have, indeed, believed and learned that Jesus is the holy one of God—meaning he himself is the Messiah.

Jesus closes this section by letting them know that even among the twelve there would be one who falls away. Peter had over-spoken his case. There was, in fact, one in the inner circle, one of the twelve, who would, likewise, walk away.

Conclusion

Discipleship is all demanding. You cannot follow Jesus at a safe distance. While our humanity delights in having masses flow through the church, Jesus never takes delight in multitudes who only have a superficial interest in him. In fact, Jesus subjects those who desire to follow him to the most severe sifting process by making tremendous demands. Many in the crowds were simply

curious about him. They wanted to see this new miracle worker. They watched from a distance, however, avoiding real commitment to the Christ. With the hardest of words (eat My flesh and drink My blood), Jesus turns to would-be disciples, demanding complete intimacy and devotion from those who would find eternal life through the real bread from heaven.