

John 6:60-69

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.” From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Jesus was at the turning point of his ministry on earth. Once the people had been flocking to see and hear him, to see his miracles and hear the Word he was speaking, but with these words his great popularity would come to an end.

You see, these words are the final part of a long discussion Jesus has been having with the Jews. It all started way back at the beginning of John chapter 6, which we read about a month ago. The crowd of over five thousand people has come to see Jesus and they need to eat, so Jesus miraculously feeds all those people with just five small loaves of bread and two small fish. But they missed the point of that miracle. It quickly became apparent that these people were only concerned with filling their bellies. They didn't understand that Jesus didn't just want to provide for their physical needs. He wanted to provide for them spiritually too, by giving them *spiritual* bread, the bread that gives eternal life. Jesus wanted to feed their souls with his Word.

But they just didn't seem to get it. So finally, Jesus puts it very vividly: He tells them that if they want eternal life, if they want to never be hungry again, then they should eat his flesh and drink his blood. Of course, he was using a picture—he was talking about the sacrifice he would make of his own flesh and blood to pay for the sins of the world. But they still didn't get it. In fact, even some of Jesus' disciples—not the Twelve Apostles we're familiar with, but other disciples—were offended by what Jesus was saying. Eat his flesh? Drink his blood? That doesn't sound pleasant!

“This is a hard teaching,” they grumbled. “Who can accept it?” They didn't like what they were hearing from Jesus. His words and teachings offended them. And so from that time, many of Jesus' disciples turned away and no longer followed him. There were those who remained faithful to him—Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, the Twelve Apostles, and others—but never again would Jesus be surrounded by the huge crowds that had once followed him everywhere. They found him to be too offensive.

And yet we're still surprised when we realize how *offensive* the Word of God is to unbelievers. At first we might think, “How could the message of Jesus offend anybody? It's a message of love and compassion! It's the message that all our sins have been freely forgiven because of Jesus' death and resurrection! It's the message that eternal life in heaven awaits all those who believe in his name! Isn't that message beautiful? Isn't that the best news anyone could ever hear? How could it be offensive?”

But Jesus *is* offensive to those who do not believe! Because after all, people naturally think that they're really pretty good. They're not evil or wicked or sinful, at least they're not as bad as some other people out there. They think that they don't need a Savior, and that all the good things they do should be more than enough to redeem themselves in God's eyes. “You mean God demands *perfection*? You mean we're naturally sinful in God's eyes, even *before* we've done anything wrong? You mean there's *nothing* we can do to save ourselves?” That's offensive! Even if it seems strange to us, Jesus is *offensive* to unbelievers. That's why so many people reject his Word; that's why so many people turn away when Jesus offers himself freely.

But the truth is, we ourselves are not so very different. Maybe for us it's not so blatant or open. But there are still things in the Bible that offend us. For each one of us, there are things in the Bible

that we don't like, and if we had been in charge of writing it, we would have preferred not to include those things.

Maybe it's what God tells us about his chosen roles for men and women, and it doesn't make sense to us why God has reserved the position of headship for men, especially when we know that women can be capable. Or maybe it's the principles of church fellowship, and we don't like the fact that we are limited in how we can worship with some of our friends and relatives, especially when so often our similarities are so much greater than our differences. Or maybe we're offended by the parts of the Bible that we just can't wrap our minds around, like the Trinity, or the fact that Jesus was true God and true man, or the fact that Jesus' body and blood are truly present in the Lord's Supper, and we don't get why God would make it so hard for us to understand. Or maybe we're offended by the fact that we have to bear the cross, and we Christians, as the chosen people of God, must endure suffering and persecution simply because we are Christians.

And these are just a few of all the things that we might find offensive in the Word of God. We all have those teachings where if we were really going to give God a piece of our minds, we'd say with Jesus' disloyal disciples, "This, this is a hard teaching. Who could possibly be able to accept it?" I have them. We all do. So which of Jesus' teachings offends you?

When you think about it, the disciples who turned away from Jesus were right. They were right about how hard it is to believe God's teachings. "Who can accept this?" They asked. "Who is able to believe what you're telling us, Jesus?" And Jesus himself tells them how right they are! He acknowledges how hard, how impossible it is to believe! He says, "No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. No one is able to believe my words unless God himself gives them the power to believe."

The truth is, the teachings of the Bible are more than just offensive to us. They're impossible for us to believe without God's work in us. Because even though it's all true, even though it's all the Word of God, the sinful nature in us simply doesn't want to believe it. It rejects the Word. It wants nothing to do with the Word or with the Lord who gave it to us.

Yes, those unfaithful disciples were right. They saw very clearly exactly what the problem is—but they missed the solution, even though he was right there in front of them. "No one can come to me *unless the Father has enabled him.*"

It is God who draws us to himself. It is God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who turns us to Jesus and opens our hearts and minds to his teaching. After all, he's already drawn us to believe the unbelievable! When you consider what God has revealed to us about our salvation and our Savior—who could believe it? What human mind could possibly understand or fathom what God himself has done?

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. The eternal God became a human being and lived in the very world he had created. He lived according to his own law that he had given to us, and he died! He who created life died an innocent death on the cross of Calvary, a sacrifice that wiped clean all sins of all time. And Jesus' resurrection from death proves to us that he *is* the Holy One of God, that the promises he gave to us will not be broken, and that the Word he has given to us is the Word of eternal life.

That's what we remember. Jesus says to us, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Over the past few weeks, in several different ways, God has shown us how his Word gives us life. It is wisdom from God that fills our souls. It is bread from heaven that sustains us on the path to eternal life. God's Word is capable of so many things beyond our understanding. It does enable us to believe in all the things Jesus teaches.

So whatever it is in the Bible that you're struggling with, whatever you don't understand, whatever hard teachings you're trying to accept, know and believe this: It's not really you who has to accept it. Trust in God's power to increase your faith through his Word. Because he's the only one who draws us to stand with the Twelve Apostles and to say with Simon Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." Amen.

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