

I. INTRODUCTION

Church family, I am truly humbled, grateful and honored to be preaching this morning as part of my candidacy for the English minister position. I have been greatly blessed by HCC over my 14+ years here. It is an exciting prospect, Lord willing, to pivot from my current occupation as a commercial attorney to serve the Lord and my home church in a full-time, vocational role.

Speaking of the legal profession, I've been told on countless occasions that attorneys are "wordsmiths." In a sense, this is true. Chefs work with knives, accountants work with numbers, musicians work with notes, and lawyers work with words.

Words are what allow us to communicate and express ideas, feelings, and meaning. Without words, we cannot form relationships. With them, we can woo a lover, connect with a friend, or...bicker with one another [*story of Titus and Philip arguing about ice cream cone at Chick-Fil-A*] We know words can be influential. Lyrics and poetry can move us, encouraging words can inspire, while hurtful words can scar and shatter for life. That's why the saying "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" is just plain wrong! Words can cut so much deeper than any physical wound. Words are powerful. And they can be difficult.

As we will see, Jesus' words at the end of John 6 *are* challenging. His followers are right when they say, "This is a hard saying" (v60). But, how do we respond to the difficult words of our Lord? To answer this, I'll break down the passage into three main sections: (1) fleshing out Jesus' difficult doctrine in verses 53-59, (2) the response of false disciples in verses 60-66, and then (3) the response of true disciples in verses 67-69.

My aim is that the Spirit uses holy Scripture this morning to examine your faith in Christ and to encourage you to be his true disciples who take his words to heart.

II. BRIEF BACKGROUND OF JOHN 6

Before we dive in, let's put this passage in context. First, as a general note, this incredibly rich portion of God's word contains many motifs from Exodus. The time setting in verse 4 is the Passover. John also mentions Jesus going up a mountain in verse 3, which is likely an allusion to Moses. From verses 1-15, we have the famous feeding of bread to the 5,000, which evokes the imagery of Moses from within the people.

Then, in verses 16-21, Jesus walks on the sea, demonstrating his control over water, just like God parting the Red Sea in Exodus 14. When the crowds find Jesus starting in verse 25, he wants them to know the miraculous feeding wasn't about the bread itself, but about *who gave the bread*. In fact, Jesus calls himself the "bread of life" (v35) who has come down from heaven (v38). But the crowd fails to recognize Jesus for who he truly is.

Because as we continue to see in verses 41-52, the people only wanted Jesus for what he could give them. They grumble in verse 41 about his claim to come from heaven, echoing the complaints of their forefathers in the wilderness (Ex 16; 17:2). More dialogue ensues, with Jesus doubling down in verse 51 that he is the "living bread that came down from heaven." And not only that, his *flesh* is the bread he

gives for the life of the world. This gruesome language raises tension levels. Jesus' shocking words causes a sharp dispute among the Jews in verse 52, who scornfully ask "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

III. MAIN POINT 1: THE DIRECTNESS AND DIFFICULTY OF JESUS' DOCTRINE (6:53-59)

Jesus' answer to this question brings us to our first main point: His teaching can be direct and difficult as it is here. He does not mince words. He does not compromise or dilute. Unlike the latest version of ChatGPT, he does not flatter nor say what you want to hear. He doesn't back down but rather escalates the rhetoric about his identity.

Look at verses 53 to 55. Jesus adds to the repulsive idea of eating his flesh, the revolting imagery of drinking his blood. Drinking blood was expressly forbidden under the Mosaic law (Lev 17:10-14), so this would have been utterly appalling to Jesus' hearers. And even more offensive still, he says that unless you eat his flesh and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

How can it be that this eating and drinking of Christ leads to life? First, you need to go back to 6:40, where Jesus says, "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." Compare this to verse 54: "Whoever **feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood** has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." The "looking and believing" in verse 40 is equivalent to the "eating and drinking" in verse 54. In other words, eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood is a metaphor for believing in him.

The "flesh" and "blood" in verse 55 are also metaphors referring to his death on the cross. On the cross, Jesus, as the Word become flesh (1:14), gave his body for the life of the world (v52). On the cross, Christ shed his blood for the atonement of our sins. Unlike the deficient spiritual sustenance that came before him, Jesus' body and blood, was the perfect sacrifice. They are *true* food and *true* drink, able to satisfy God's wrath against sin and man's deepest spiritual longings.

In stark contrast, Jesus mentions in verse 58 the "bread the fathers ate," which is the physical manna that miraculously sustained Israel for 40 years in the wilderness. This bread, though a divine gift, could not, and was never intended to, impart eternal life. That's why our Lord says the fathers ate this bread and still died.

Application: Be Mindful of What You Consume Spiritually

Now if the bread that the fathers ate still resulted in death, but those who feed on Jesus, the true bread from heaven, live forever, we should be aware and vigilant about what we are feeding ourselves from a spiritual standpoint.

For, the phrase "You are what you eat" not only applies to physical food but also spiritual diet. In our consumer society, we have the means and motivation to pursue countless forms of bread. Everything is literally at our fingertips. Just a few swipes on your shopping app allows you to buy anything from pretty much anywhere in the world (so long as tariffs are paused!). YouTube, Instagram and TikTok (if it is not

banned!) pump out content based on sophisticated algorithms to keep us tapping for more videos. Some of us tend to doomscroll the news, chat groups or social media sites, or binge on Netflix or other streaming services. Over time, what we read or watch cumulatively shapes our values, viewpoints and lifestyles. *We truly become what we consume.*

So, beloved, let me ask you: Do you take care in what you consume in your personal time? Yes, we have Christian liberty to enjoy movies, TV shows, books, and music. And yes, it's fine to unwind by watching some silly online videos or even playing video games in moderation. But, ask yourself honestly, "Is what I'm consuming on a regular basis helping me grow in godliness and my affection toward God and other people? Is it helping me feed on Jesus? Or, is it reinforcing a self-centered habit of satisfying my own needs, pushing the boundaries of what ought not to be, or worse, weakening or numbing my love for the Lord?"

Based on Jesus' words in these verses, I exhort you to resolve to consume content that helps you feed on Christ, that stirs you to greater trust in him, that deepens your knowledge of his will.

Jesus makes it uncompromisingly clear that only those who feed on him have eternal life. Only those who can accept his death as the *sole* way to be reconciled to God have true hope. His words here are difficult not only because of their graphic nature, but also because of their rigidity and exclusivity.

IV. MAIN POINT 2: RESPONSE OF FALSE AND SUPERFICIAL "DISCIPLES": GRUMBLING AND ABANDONMENT (6:60-66)

How does the crowd react? Verses 60 to 66 cover the first response of false and superficial disciples. This is the second main point for this morning. These fickle followers first grumble but then abandon Jesus. They are would-be disciples of nominal faith who demand signs, but want nothing to do with the Person to whom those signs point. They were part of the crowd who wanted to take Jesus by force (6:15) and make him serve their agenda, which we unfortunately often see play out today in politics, academia, and social causes. They domesticate Jesus, putting him on a spiritual leash that can be extended or shortened at their will. Jesus is welcomed and allowed to affect their lives...but only until it starts to get uncomfortable or inconvenient.

In verses 60 to 61, Jesus exposes their griping by asking, "Do you take offense at this?" He knows that if they are already offended by his extreme words, they would be outraged by the death that he would suffer. That's what is behind his question in verse 62: "Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

Yes, presumably if these false disciples actually saw him ascend on high, they would come to believe he came down from heaven. But, it's more likely their unbelief would only increase. For, before Jesus ascends to glory, he must go through the cross, which, as we heard from sermons from Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, was a distinctly divisive and scandalous event. Such a death would be too much for these false disciples to bear. The cross would be their stumbling block and they would not come to him.

Jesus, who had the Spirit without measure (John 3:34), who knew what was in man (John 2:24-25), knew in verses 64 and 65 that unless God the Father permits it, no one can come to his Son to be saved. This builds off 6:44, where he says, unless the Father “draws him” no one can come to him.

Tangent on Divine Sovereignty in Man’s Salvation

As a quick aside, these verses affirm the exclusivity and totality of divine sovereignty in the salvation of sinners. Salvation is ultimately the sole result of God. Yet, there is also the free offer of the gospel, and the truth that *whoever* chooses to believe will be saved. Though salvation is never achieved apart from the drawing power of God, it is also never consummated apart from the willingness of humans to hear and respond. So, Jesus can simultaneously affirm genuine free will while emphasizing divine sovereignty. It’s another example of his difficult doctrine. If how this works is not exactly clear to you, that’s okay; it’s not to me either. It just means we’re not God, which is a good thing to remember!

It is after saying this, in one of the most heartbreaking verses in all of Scripture, we read, in verse 66 that “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.” These disciples became apostates. They abandoned him because they just could not believe nor accept his difficult words.

Illustration: Sharing the Gospel with Students in Taiwan

While in Taiwan after college, I remember sharing the gospel with students who at first were intrigued by Jesus and attracted to his moral teachings. But, as it became clear that the Jesus of the Bible required submission to his lordship, and that he refused to be molded in their image, sadly, many of them became disillusioned and deserted Jesus. Yet for some, when Jesus ceased to be useful to them, they discarded him like an old magazine. For others, Jesus did not bring about the results they were hoping: a new romantic relationship, getting into a coveted school, landed that dream job, earning good grades, etc. So, in their sad disappointment, like the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-23), they left him.

Gospel Call

Perhaps some of you can relate to these students who were drawn to Jesus. Perhaps he piques your intellectual interest, grants you emotional strength during a tough period, or provides a social network of Christian friends. You’ve been seeking Jesus for a while, but never quite being able to believe in him fully. Sometimes this is because you have more questions, struggles and doubts to work out, which is fine. I encourage you to keep pursuing answers and I’d love to speak with you about your questions after service. [*share about personal faith journey in college*]

But, do not stay at the fringes of his love or in spiritual no-man’s land. You have a crucial need to believe. This is so because God created the world good and created each human being to know and worship him. But, we have all violated God’s commands, fallen short of his glory, and are deserving of eternal death and condemnation. This is what the Bible calls “sin.”

Jesus, in love, has taken on our sin and paid the penalty of eternal death by dying on the cross and being raised three days later, proving himself to be God who has overcome sin and death. Jesus’ own words summarize it best: “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in

him should not perish but have eternal life” (3:16). Has God been working in your heart to seek Christ? He is drawing you to him! Respond by trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

V. MAIN POINT 3: RESPONSE OF TRUE DISCIPLES: RECOGNITION AND BELIEF (6:67-69)

And that is exactly what Peter does in verses 67 to 69, which forms the last point this morning: true disciples recognize Jesus for who he is and believe his words, even when difficult. They stay with him and are drawn to, not repulsed by, his words. They are not horrified by the cross, but humbled by it.

After most of his would-be disciples abandon Jesus, he now turns his attention to the twelve apostles and asks them poignantly in verse 67 “Do you want to go away as well?” The NIV translation catches better the traumatic possibility of the twelve also turning away: “*You do not want to leave too, do you?*”

Peter, in perhaps his finest hour, answers in verses 68-69: “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.” Peter realizes that only Jesus’ words can save and bring us into a right relationship with God, and thus a right relationship with others and the world. He treasures Jesus as our Passover, our exodus from slavery to sin. He knows that to feed on Christ is to believe him, and to *believe Christ is to believe his words*.

The crowd did the opposite. They were more than happy to accept the *works* of Christ. His miraculous feeding, healing and exorcisms made their lives easier. But they spurned his *words*, by which he claimed to be the exclusive source of life itself. They loved his works, but hated his words. The problem with them was not that they didn’t understand his words; it’s that they understood them and found them despicable.

But, Peter latched onto Jesus’ words and viewed him not as some miracle service provider, but the Holy One of God whom he wanted to serve. There was nowhere else to go because Jesus was his all in all. *True disciples view Jesus as their everything*.

It’s not wise from an earthly perspective to put all your money in a single stock. We’re supposed to diversify our portfolio to hedge against risk, especially during tumultuous markets we have now. But true disciples invest only in Jesus, for *he is the only treasure worth our all*.

VI. APPLICATION POINTS

#1: Be Candid with God, But Avoid Grumbling

Taking all these verses as a whole, we have several ways they apply and impact our lives. First, do you grumble against God secretly in your hearts? Do you inwardly complain about how God seems to bless others more than yourself, or that he is not answering prayers the way you hoped? While it is always okay to be candid before God and even express your disappointment and perplexity at his ways, be careful that you do not let it devolve into grumbling. The line between lament and grumbling is thin, and it cuts along how you think of Jesus.

#2: Examine Whether You Use Jesus as a Means to Your Ends

Second, do you see Jesus as a means to your ends? I talked earlier about being mindful of what content you consume, but let's be real and admit that Christians are not spared from the temptations and seductions of our consumeristic society! This includes how the world views Jesus. Do you think Jesus is a genie or bread-maker who fills *your* needs in *your* way at *your* timing? I know cognitively, you might reject this view, and publicly, you certainly oppose it, but for some of you, the way you interact with God or walk with Christ outside of church may tell a different story.

Perhaps you shy away from obeying his difficult teachings or try to negotiate a middle ground, as if such a thing exists. Perhaps you fit Jesus into your schedule only when expedient. Maybe you are too used to coasting along in complacency and comfort until you actually need Jesus.

For others though, you're already crushed and discouraged because you don't think you can ever be a faithful follower. You feel the weight of your sin bearing down and you respond by trying to do more "godly" things to make up for your shortcomings or faults.

And this is why I think the greatest reason Jesus' words in this passage may be difficult for our church is that they require you to *stop striving*. It is immensely hard simply to rest in your identity as a child of God who did nothing to merit his good pleasure toward you. It is against your ambitious nature to be still and know he is God. When you work hard at something and it doesn't pan out, you typically respond how? By trying even harder!

#3: Avoid a Performance-Based Faith, But Rest in the Words and Work of Christ

I know many of us in the workforce are tied to benchmarks: performance reviews affect bonuses and promotions, work product affects supervisor feedback and deal opportunities, quality of service affects client retention and satisfaction. It is hard not to carry over a similar works-based attitude into our own walks with Christ and church life. We really want to be able to say look, "Lord, look at how much I've done and how well! Therefore, bless me!" But the gospel firmly opposes such thinking.

Beloved, we must not succumb to a performance-based, results-oriented faith. We need to unsubscribe from any transactional-like view of faith which says so long as you work hard enough or serve long enough you can maintain good standing before God. This type of legalistic faith is suffocating and can easily breed pride and disenchantment (especially with others who don't apparently work as hard or well as you do). Now, I'm not saying that we don't do excellent work for God, because we should. I am saying though that our works, no matter how excellent or numerous, do not ultimately ground our standing before him. Only Jesus does.

Jesus offers words of eternal life. His words, when perceived by the Spirit, are a balm to hearts that are burnt out, over-burdened and under constant pressure of performing before God and others. They invite us to rest in the perfect life and finished work of our Lord.

Jesus' words are spirit and life (v63)! They not only say you are not abandoned, but you are secure; not forsaken, but rescued; not shamed, but honored! My sons do not have to perform to win my love; they already have it and always will. How much more so with God, who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, and in doing so, will graciously give us all things (Rom 8:32).

Be assured of your adoption as children of God the Father who lavishes his love upon you not because of who you are, but because of what his Son has done; not because of what you've done, but because of who Jesus is.

VII. CONCLUSION

Church family, my aim today has not been to frighten you into thinking you might be a false disciple. Though if the Spirit has used this message to convict you to stop being a lukewarm, flip-flopping follower of our Lord, then praise God. But, my earnest hope is to encourage all of you to feast on Christ and believe in him.

We've seen how Jesus' words to the Jews in chapter 6 became increasingly difficult for them to hear and accept. One response to his tough words is that of false disciples, who reject and defect because they seek him merely as one to meet their demands. The other response is from Peter and true disciples, who embrace and believe him because they seek Jesus for Jesus.

Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

- Where will you go if you are cynical, angry or hurt by the hypocrisy or harshness of the church? Go to Jesus, who is gentle and lowly in heart (Matt 11:29), perfect in integrity and compassionate. He rails against such hypocrisy and says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5:4).
- Where will you go if you're stressed out about the direction of our economy or country? Go to Jesus, who says "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (John 14:27).
- Where will you go if you're about to collapse because of family strife or pressure, or personal failure or brokenness? Go to Jesus, who is the Chief Shepherd of your soul and leads you to green pastures and still waters (Ps 23:2). He says: "In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).
- Where will you go if you are simply too tired and weak to cling, let alone, walk with God...you just want to give up? Fall into Jesus' arms, who says "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28). Let him carry and strengthen you by his grace.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but Jesus' words will always heal me. Like Peter, go to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2). Trust him. Lean on him by the Spirit. Be nourished by his words. *Treasure Christ as his true disciples.*