

July 17, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Don't Stumble Over Hard Words

John 6:45 – 61

This chapter begins with at least 5000 followers. And when it ends all we see are twelve. Actually it is only eleven because Judas is not really following Christ at all, we find out. But the point is that at first glance, this ministry venture looks like a failure. Nearly everybody leaves. No one is sticking around. Instead of being pierced by the word and falling on their knees in confession and repentance, and turning and following Christ, almost all the people who hear Jesus preach, leave. And the direct cause of their leaving is the very message Jesus intends to be good news for them. You would think that if anyone could preach the gospel and get great results it would be Jesus. But exactly the opposite thing is going on. Jesus preaches and most everybody leaves. What is going on here?

One of the things we should understand from this is that the gospel is offensive to the unregenerate mind. Not in the way that bad breath or a Martin Scorsese film is offensive, offending the senses. But the gospel is offensive on a different level, because the gospel tells us that we are wrong. This is the central stumbling block of the gospel. Issues of internal contradictions, biblical infallibility, creation versus science, and so on, are excuses to ignore the main problem people have with the gospel – it tells you that you are wrong. Because the gospel says that all men are fallen, all have sinned, no one is righteous and there are none who can claim any moral superiority. And it says that you and I are by nature sinful, that the thoughts and intentions of our hearts are only evil continually, and we need to be saved, not only from ourselves, but from the wrath of a Holy God. This offends our pride and our sense of self-sufficiency. The Gospel holds a mirror up to us and what it shows is not people with their lives all together. It shows people spiritually, emotionally and physically making progressive shipwreck of their lives. The Bible, our gospel mirror, shows a human race that is broken, ugly and brutish, on their best day. This gospel tells us truths about ourselves that deep down we know, but we think we can fix. And we stumble.

We saw last week that this gospel message caused all kinds of offense and grumbling among Jesus' audience. They didn't get it and they didn't like it. And the amazing thing is that Jesus didn't back off when He saw He was losing His audience. They were offended that He would portray Himself as the Bread of Life that came down from heaven and they grumbled at that. But He went on to say '**Unless the Father draws you and gives you understanding and grants you to see and savor the goodness of the gospel – you won't get it and you won't like it. The fact that you are grumbling means that you have not come to Me; the truth is, you are not disposed to come to Me, and unless the Father intervenes, you will never come to Me.**' Instead of softening the pitch at this point, Jesus seems to take pains to make His hard words even harder.

He goes on in verse 45 to explain how the Father draws: *"It is written in the prophets, 'AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.'* *Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.* John 6:45 Essentially what Jesus is saying is that **the Father's drawing is by revelation** of Himself to the one He draws. Jesus uses three words here – teaching, hearing, and learning – and tells us that this is how we are drawn to the Father. In our experience, we hear the gospel, and in that hearing we learn about who we are and who God is and why it is that we need a Savior and we begin to be taught by the Holy Spirit about the reality of God and we realize our sinfulness and His sufficiency and we believe in Christ and we come to Him. But this was a further offense to the Jews because they thought they had a close relationship with God, and Jesus says, **'If that were true, you would believe what I say, because everyone who hears and learns from the Father comes to Me – but you're not coming.'**

And then to ratchet things up another notch, Jesus implies that if they really knew God they would recognize Him: *"Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life."* John 6:46-47 In other words, Jesus tells us what John told us in chapter one: *No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.* John 1:18 That is, He is the One from God and unless they come to Him, there is no possibility of knowing the God that they claim to know. It is the Son who explains or declares all that the Father is to His children, and they are rejecting the very One who can bring them to God.

Jesus doesn't stop there, He goes on: *I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.* John 6:48 – 50 He saw they were offended by the fact that He claimed to be the Bread of life, and so He says it again – plainly – ***I am the Bread of Life.*** He knew they were preferring the miracle of the bread in the wilderness and the miracle of the loaves across the lake for the real bread that was before them. The manna in the wilderness and the multiplied loaves of the previous day were meant to point to the real bread that God intended them to eat. The manna and the loaves could only sustain life – they couldn't give life – eternal life. God intended that the food we eat that nourishes and sustains us would serve to point us to the real food – Christ Himself. And if we eat of Him, we will live forever.

Jesus links eating bread here in verse 50 with believing on Christ in verse 47 so that we will understand that to believe in Christ means that we in some sense eat of Him. This goes all the way back to the Garden. It was not by accident or random chance that God planted the Tree of Life in the Garden and told Adam to eat. The Tree of Life was a picture of Christ who is life. Eating means that we ingest, we digest, we savor the taste and aroma and goodness of what we eat. That is what it means to believe. Believing is not just having the correct thoughts about Jesus. Believing means that we consider Jesus Christ as necessary and even vital for our existence. Just as we require material food to continue to live – we must have the bread of heaven to really live. **Believing is eating.**

2 Peter tells us what happens when we believe: *seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature* 2 Peter 1:3-4 First of all our believing is a direct result of God's divine power coming to us to enable us to see and understand who Christ is. And then Peter says that His glory and excellence has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises of which we partake – or share in. And how is it that we partake of His precious and magnificent promises? We eat them.

This eating metaphor is literally all over the Bible. One of the first commands of God to Adam in the Garden was to eat. In Deuteronomy, Moses reminds Israel that their real life, their real sustenance is to eat the very word of God: *He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.* Deuteronomy 8:3. And Jesus quotes this text to the devil in the wilderness. Jeremiah the prophet knew what it meant to eat and he says: *Your words were found and I ate them, and Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O LORD God of hosts.* Jeremiah 15:16 **To believe means that we enjoy Christ as our real bread and real drink** – that we take His word in and chew on it, savor it, eat it, digest it.

Mere Bible reading does not constitute eating. To eat the word is to spend time over it, sucking out all the goodness we can find. And as we do that it moves into our being, nourishing us, strengthening us, transforming us. The old adage, 'You are what you eat' really is true. I remember when I was young, an older couple were visiting my parents and I noticed something strange about them. They were orange. I mean their skin had a definite orangish hue, and so I asked my dad why they looked that way and he told me they lived on carrots. Now that was probably not all they ate, but it constituted a majority of their diet. They ate them cooked and raw and juiced and all sorts of ways, and eventually they looked like human carrots. The same is true of any other diet - if you live off McDonalds – you get fat. If you live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God – you live forever.

And then Jesus drops the bombshell. He had been making the clear connection between Himself as the living bread and the necessity of eating that bread and then He makes this remarkable statement: *"I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh."* John 6:51 Now Jesus is really moving into the offensive realm. To make the connection between the bread of life and His own flesh must have been not only startling, but repulsive to His hearers. Incidentally, it is from passages like this and the ones that follow, that tales arose about the early Christians being cannibals. This is not a statement that the natural, unregenerate mind can comprehend. But Jesus was not talking about people literally eating His body. He was pointing to the cross where He took the place of everyone in the world who would believe, giving His own body on the cross as a ransom for sinners. It was Jesus in His humanity that suffered and died so that those in the world would live. But all the Jews heard was 'He wants us to eat Him!'

Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, "How can this man give us His flesh to eat?" John 6:52 And again Jesus doesn't soften the blow here, but rather makes it more offensive: *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 yourselves."* John 6:53 They must have been wondering, 'He's only been talking about bread – what is this talk about blood? Where is He getting the blood?' To Jews raised under the Law of Moses, to even eat a piece of meat from which the blood had not been drained was to violate the law. And here is Jesus talking about drinking blood! No wonder these guys were so offended. Only pagans ate blood – and yet here is someone claiming to be the bread of life, claiming to be the Messiah, advocating blood drinking.

Still Jesus doesn't stop until His hearers are completely offended: *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats Me, he also will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of heaven; not as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever.* John 6:54-58

These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, "This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?" John 6:59-60 The conclusion Jesus' disciples come to is that this word was hard and that no one could understand it. The word is **skleros** and it means hard, harsh, rough, stiff, violent, offensive, even intolerable. The gospel landed on their hearts like a ton of bricks. They found it hard – they found it harsh, talking about eating flesh and drinking blood – they found that they couldn't hear it. When they said, 'Who can listen to it?' they weren't asking around saying 'Who understands this?' It was a rhetorical question implying that no one could understand it, and it offended them.

How do we handle hard words? What do we do when the words of Jesus offend us? Do we bow in subjection to them – or do we grumble over them and argue with them? What do you do when the word of God cuts right across your world and exposes your evil heart and your malicious motives and your sinful self? Does it inspire heartfelt repentance and passionate worship, or are you tempted to run and hide? The gospel works in our hearts by tearing away the false foundations, stripping away false hopes, plowing up the hardened ground of our hearts so that the seed of the word would germinate and grow. I would say that no one comes to faith unless he has first been offended to the core. It is only when the gospel of Jesus Christ batters down the proud gates of our hearts that we are in any condition to receive it. How could we not be offended by the message of the gospel? It tells us that we are wholly sinful, that every motive and move of our hearts is wicked – it tells us that we are under the sentence of death, facing the wrath of a holy God – and without hope in ourselves – bound for eternal hell. And that is offensive to the unregenerate man.

But it isn't until we are offended, until we are shaken from our complacency, until we get alarmed over our sinful condition, that we will bow our knees in obedience to His Lordship. The Gospel of Jesus has teeth. It bites hard into the kingdom of darkness and rips chunks from it wherever it goes. Jesus didn't make his message smooth and soft in order to suit the fancies of the religious majority. His Gospel was a hard word that exalted God, lifted high the cross, proclaimed total commitment to Himself, and utterly stripped man of all self-reliance, shattering self-righteousness, tearing down false religion, leaving men stripped bare before God in utter dependence on His free grace alone to save them.

But the oh the joy we experience when we let the word offend us utterly! It is only then that we hear the good news. God is love and He loves the unlovely me – just as I am. God is for me and not against me – through Christ He has forgiven all my sins – past, present and future. He has made me his child, adopted me into the family of God – He has given me the gift of the Holy Spirit who pours out God's love into my heart and tells me I am born from above. He has freed me from the slavery to sin and sin's hold over me has been broken! Instead of an object of His wrath I am the object of His deep love and He always looks on me and treats me with gracious favor – always working all things together for my good and His glory. Because He justified me, He takes every trial, every problem, every circumstance and situation and makes it do good for me. And when I sin, He feels no wrath for me but causes me to turn and confess my sin so that He can show me His gracious and forgiving love that has been in His heart all along. And even though on my best day I deserve none of His lovingkindness, He showers me with His love.

Don't let the words of Jesus cause you to ultimately stumble and reject the message. Jesus knew the gospel was stumbling His listeners. *But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, "Does this cause you to stumble?"* John 6:61 The word stumble here is **skandalizo** and it means to put a stumbling block or impediment in the way, over which another may trip and fall. Metaphorically it means to offend, and here the idea is that what Jesus said put something so offensive in the path of these people that it caused some of them to stumble and fall away. And what He put squarely in their path was the cross. The cross of Christ comes in to strip us bare of every pretence, every proud thought, every ounce of self-reliance to leave us wholly dependent on His saving grace.

The crowd loved Jesus when He was feeding them. They travelled miles out of their way to see if He would do it again. But when He begins to explain who He is and what He's come to do, nearly all of them leave. **We all love Jesus whenever He's handing out free bread.** But inevitably, we come up against a hard word. For those who are offended that Jesus would say that no one comes to Him except the Father first draws them, don't stumble over that. If you are offended that He claims to be the only way, don't stumble over that. Let that offense break you, let it strip away those false hopes, let it plow up the hard ground of your heart, let it give you a distaste for the bread of this world and lead you to the living Bread.

For those of you who have come to Christ, He doesn't stop with the hard words – in fact He uses those to search out all the hidden recesses of rebellion and unbelief that remain. We all seem to like it well enough whenever Jesus points out the sinful behaviors in others, but we don't seem to enjoy having the spotlight on us. It is much harder to love Jesus whenever He challenges our understanding on issues like salvation, relationships, sexuality, service, giving, faithfulness, worship. It is then that we tend to argue with His words: "Do I really need to give 10% to God...and is that supposed to be gross, or net?" "He doesn't really mean that I should love my enemies, does He?" "I wasn't gossiping...I was just sharing a prayer request." "Is divorce really so wrong? You wouldn't think so if you knew my husband!" Our human nature is such that **we are forever looking for the loophole** that applies to us and (typically) only to us. God's word is great for controlling the sinfulness of other people, but we tend to break ranks and run away as hard and fast as we can whenever the gaze of Jesus falls squarely on whatever we happen to be doing in the dark.

Don't be stumbled this morning with hard words – embrace them, eat them, savor them, let them do the work in your heart – let them lead you to Christ. Say with the Psalmist: *How sweet are Your words to my taste ! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!* Psalm 119:103 **Feast yourselves on the Bread of life.**

O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! Psalm 34:8

Our gracious heavenly Father,

We thank You this morning for hard words – words that expose our weak and sorry condition and words that heal and words that nourish and words that give eternal life. Let Your word tear down all our false foundations, strip away all our hope in anything else. Let it break up the hardened ground of our hearts so that the seed of life would germinate and grow. Grant us an appetite for the Bread of Heaven. Give us we pray, a distaste for all the bread the world has to give, and fill us with an insatiable longing for the real stuff. Oh how we love Your word! It is sweeter than honey to our souls. Incline our hearts to this food and let it break our bondage to all the temporary, unfilling banquets the world has to offer. May Your words of life pierce through our souls and generate spiritual life and may we be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.