

Message #25

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## JESUS AND THE CHALLENGE TO DISCIPLESHIP

JOHN 6:52-71

I.

In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf the wizard says to Bilbo Baggins, **“I am looking for someone to share in an adventure that I am arranging, and it’s very difficult to find anyone.”** Bilbo Baggins replies, **“I should think so--- in these parts! We are plain quiet folk and have no use for adventures. Nasty disturbing uncomfortable things! Make you late for dinner!”**

In the movie version, a disgruntled Gandalf speaks, **“You’ve been sitting quietly far too long. Tell me; when did doilies and your mother’s dishes become so important to you? I remember a young hobbit who always was running off in search of elves and the woods, who would stay out late, and come home after dark, trailing mud and twigs and fireflies. A young hobbit who would have liked nothing better than to find out what was beyond the borders of the shire. The world is not in books and maps; it’s out there.”**

Jesus Christ called those who would follow Him to participate in a grand adventure. As with Gandalf, He sometimes found it difficult to find those who would join him. Such is the case in the story before us this morning.

We have been making our way through John’s Gospel in the New Testament. We have found that the Apostle John organized his biographical material around seven sign miracles that Jesus performed during the course of His public ministry. We left off three Sundays ago in #6, as Jesus was engaged in conversation with Galilean Jews after He had performed the miracle of multiplying the loaves and the fishes.

The events in this chapter occur in Galilee (CAPERNAUM MAP 2), which is the northern part of what we know today as Israel. They happen around the Sea of Galilee, which is actually a fresh water lake. (CAPERNAUM MAP) It was on the northeast shore of this lake where Jesus performed the bread

multiplication miracle before a crowd of 5000 men plus women and children. After that miracle Jesus sent the disciples in a boat across to Capernaum. During the night, Jesus rejoined them after walking on the sea, which was the fifth sign miracle recorded by the Apostle John.

On the following day, Jesus had this conversation in Capernaum with Galilean Jews, many of whom had witnessed the miracle on the previous day. The people recognized that the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the fishes had significant parallels with the provision of manna during the time of Moses. Jesus claimed that He was the bread of life pictured in the manna and the bread that was provided the previous day. Jesus claimed to have come from heaven. Most of the crowd was not buying it. In v. 51 Jesus said that His listeners needed to eat this bread, which is His flesh.

II.

So in vv. 52-59, which is on p. 892 in the black Bibles, we pick up the story, and we find that JESUS GIVES THE CHALLENGE TO BELIEVE. (II. JESUS GIVES THE CHALLENGE TO BELIEVE) According to vv. 52 & 53, **“The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’ 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.’”**

The term “the Jews” in John’s Gospel is used most of the time to refer to the religious leaders in Jerusalem who stand in opposition to Jesus. The Jews here claim to have some knowledge of Jesus’ family. So perhaps they represent the religious establishment in Galilee, which is also beginning to oppose the claims of Jesus.

There is a disagreement among these opponents about how to understand Jesus’ statement about eating His flesh. But primarily they are reacting against the outlandish claims of Jesus. This Jesus is claiming to be from heaven. Back in v. 42 these Jewish skeptics said that they knew the parents of Jesus. They knew the village from which He came. How could He say that He was from heaven?

At the beginning of #6 the author John noted that the feast of the Passover was near. Early rabbis spoke about eating the flesh of lambs and drinking the blood of grapes at this feast. Back in #1 John the Baptist was recorded as declaring that Jesus was the Lamb of God who had come to take away the sins of the world. That declaration pointed in the direction of a sacrificial death.

But the crowd of Galilean Jews was finding Jesus' recent statements to be offensive. Speaking about animal sacrifices, God commanded Moses in Leviticus #17 v. 10 (LEVITICUS 17:10), **"If any one of the house of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people."** God was talking about animal blood. Jesus in v. 53 is talking about people drinking his blood. That was even more extreme and strange.

Jesus describes Himself in v. 53 as "the Son of Man." (PROJECTOR OFF) That could have been understood by His listeners as just being a claim to be a representative of humanity. But the educated Jews would also know that it was a term that was used in Daniel #7 in the Old Testament about the Messiah. Most people in the crowd were having a hard time accepting these claims.

Jesus continues in v. 54, **"Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."** Some in church history have found the primary reference here to be to the Lord's Supper. Some have interpreted this to mean that people at Communion are feeding on Christ's flesh and drinking His blood. When the priest pronounces a blessing over the elements, they mystically are transformed to become the flesh and blood of Jesus.

But is Jesus really saying that participation in the Lord's Supper gives the participant eternal life? The Apostle John in the rest of this book says that it is faith in Jesus which gives life. John also never specifically mentions the Lord's Supper in his Gospel. The other three Gospel writers do describe and specifically mention the Lord's Supper.

It seems more likely that Jesus is pointing toward His coming death. He will shed His blood and sacrifice His flesh to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. In order to benefit from that sacrifice, people must embrace Him and His message. They must take this Jesus in a figurative sense, into their innermost being. The promise for doing that in v. 54 is that the believer will experience a physical resurrection from the dead and participation in Christ's earthly kingdom.

Verses 55 & 56: **"For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him."** Food and drink are essential to physical life. Dependence upon Jesus is essential to spiritual life. The initial trusting of Jesus is a one time event. The present tense verb in v. 56 implies that continuing trust in Jesus is necessary for the process of sanctification, for becoming more like Jesus in our character.

According to v. 57, Jesus says, **“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.”** Jesus Christ was a human being as well as God. As He needed to depend upon His Heavenly Father, so also we need to depend upon Jesus. That dependence results in eternal life.

Verse 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.”** The manna provided only temporary physical life. Jesus provides eternal life. The challenge to us who follow Him is: Do we feed regularly upon Him? Do we spend time regularly in reading and studying the Bible? Do we talk to Him regularly?

J. I. Packer is an Anglican professor and writer. He says, **“Western Christianity has become superficial and shallow: we do not give ourselves time to soak ourselves in Scripture, and stunted spiritual development, which includes an undervaluing of the Bible, is the unhappy result. We need to be clear that, other things being equal, it is the Christians who eat up the Scriptures on a regular basis who are likely to achieve most for our Lord Jesus Christ in the future, just as it was Bible-fed Christians who achieved most for him in the past.”** (*Christianity Today*, 10/28/1996) Such is the value of a regular devotional life and taking advantage of the Bible study opportunities around us.

Verse 59 finishes off this section: **“Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.”** (PROJECTOR ON--- CAPERNAUM SITE) The white, partially reconstructed remains in the foreground are from a synagogue that dates to the second or third century AD. But below that, archaeologists have found remains of an earlier synagogue that date to the time of Jesus. It was in this place that Jesus spoke these words. Whether they were spoken during a Sabbath service or during a special meeting, we do not know. We do know that synagogues functioned as community centers in many of these towns. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The primary point of Jesus' words in this section is that His listeners need to believe in Him. This is becoming a skeptical audience. They have been attracted to Jesus by His miraculous deeds. But this talk of being from heaven and needing to eat His flesh and drink His blood is turning them off. Jesus is not buying their agenda either. They want a Messiah who will provide them with daily bread, like Moses did, and who will free them from the Romans and establish their own kingdom. Because of Jesus' words and His agenda, He is losing followers.

Such is the nature of the challenge today. Jesus offers eternal life. But there are difficulties with His message. Jesus makes miraculous claims. The claim is that He was born of a virgin and that He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. This runs contrary to scientific assumptions. Then He also claims to be the only way to God. This flies in the face of our tolerant, accepting society. Then He has standards that are contrary to those of our modern culture. He says that sex is reserved for marriage and that marriage is a divine institution which only involves one man and one woman. He says that life is sacred and that life in the womb is not to be killed. Such is the challenge of belief in our society.

III.

In vv. 60-66 we find that JESUS ADDRESSES THE CHALLENGE OF UNBELIEF. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JESUS ADDRESSES THE CHALLENGE OF UNBELIEF) According to v. 60, **“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’”**

Our use of the term “disciples” does not always correspond with the way in which the New Testament uses the word. We generally use the word in reference to the twelve apostles of Jesus or in reference to committed followers of Jesus. The New Testament does use the term in both of these ways. But in this section, Jesus uses it in a different way.

The original Greek word was used of learners. It might be applied to apprentices in a trade or members of a philosophical school or the followers of a Jewish rabbi. There is something of that sense here. But notice down in v. 64 that Jesus says that some of these disciples do not believe. So Jesus is using the word here in a broad sense to include all of those who have been attracted to Jesus. Many people in this crowd are just curious. Many have been attracted to Him by His miracles. Many are hoping that Jesus is the Messiah who will adopt their agenda. Many are hoping that He will provide political and economic deliverance. Those are the two things that are really important, right?

But Jesus in v. 60 is saying some hard things. They are not hard to understand. They are hard to accept. Jesus does not understand the importance of having a seeker-friendly atmosphere in the Capernaum synagogue. The things that He is saying are seeker unfriendly. But are they true?

So clearly we have at least two categories of people in this crowd at Capernaum. We have “the Jews,” which perhaps refers to the religious establishment in Galilee which is critical of Jesus and His agenda. We also have “disciples,” which includes all those who have showed up at these meetings to find out

about who this Jesus is. They are wanting to learn about Him. Some are becoming attached to Him. Many are not.

According to v. 61, **“But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this?’”** The verb “take offense” is literally “stumble.” Most of these people were following Jesus on foot. So the picture is that the claims that Jesus is making are prompting many of these people to stumble, to stop following Him anymore.

In 1 Corinthians #1 v. 23 (1 CORINTHIANS 1:23) the Apostle Paul would later write, **“...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...”** “Stumbling block” is the noun form of “stumble,” or “take offense,” in our v. 61. The Jews did not want a crucified Messiah. They did not want a leader killed at the hands of the Romans. They wanted a Messiah who would kill the Romans. They did not see any need for an atoning sacrifice. They were descendants of Abraham. They were circumcised. They were already “in” by virtue of their religious heritage. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Then Jesus says in v. 62, **“Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?”** The meaning of this question is unclear. Some suspect that this is a reference to the crucifixion. Before Jesus ascends into heaven, He must die on the cross. This prospect will be even more difficult for the disciples of Jesus to accept. I am more inclined to think that Jesus is simply referring to His return to heaven. The crowd is looking for an earthly ruler who will stay upon the earth and inaugurate an earthly kingdom. How would these disciples deal with the reality that He is going to leave them? Jesus will send the Holy Spirit, and then His committed disciples will experience transformational power.

Thus it is that He says in v. 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.”** The disciples expect a genuine Messiah to stay and rule upon the earth. But Jesus will later explain to the twelve apostles that it is necessary for Him to go away so that He can send the Holy Spirit. God will use the Holy Spirit and the words of Jesus to accomplish great things in these committed followers of Jesus.

Verse 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.)”** Clearly some of these who are earlier called “disciples” do not have genuine faith in Jesus. With His inherent supernatural knowledge, Jesus is aware of what is going on in the minds of His audience. The Apostle John adds the parenthetical comment that Jesus knew who these particular individuals were. This was not a general knowledge but a specific knowledge.

Whether Jesus knew this from the beginning of His public ministry or from the beginning of creation is not obvious. But the author's first use of "beginning" occurred in #1 v. 1 in reference to eternity past--- "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Here we also have the first reference in John's Gospel to a betrayer. The apostles do not yet have a clue that one among them will prove to be a betrayer.

Verse 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.'"** Here again Jesus brings up this election, predestination thing, and He does it in front of a largely unbelieving crowd. This is not an excuse for failing to witness, or for giving a poor presentation of the gospel, or for lacking in loving concern for others. But we need to realize from this that our best efforts are not sufficient to convince many about the truth of Jesus. Jesus was the best communicator ever. Yet most of the crowd before Him did not accept His message. No one can come to Jesus unless it is granted him by the Father

Thus in v. 66 we learn, **"After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him."** This statement has both a literal and figurative meaning. Many stopped walking about to see Him preach and perform miracles. They also decided in their minds not to listen to Him anymore. Jewish rabbis generally derived status and success from the number of disciples that followed them. To have a significant number of disciples abandon a rabbi was to risk dishonor and shame. But Jesus was a different kind of rabbi. He was looking for committed disciples.

Occasionally it is worthwhile to examine the effectiveness of our witness, both individually and corporately. But we need to keep in mind that, as Christians, we are ultimately about God's business. He tells us that people will not respond to the best methods of outreach, unless they are called by God.

We also need to keep in mind that in most of our church congregations there are disciples in the broad sense of the term like we have here. There are some who are curious about Jesus. That is fine. We are glad for the opportunity to be a testimony to them. As with the Jews in Jesus' day, there are also some people around because of their religious tradition and family connections. They think that they are "in" because they have been baptized or because they are good people or because they are religious. But as Jesus told the religious leader Nicodemus, "You must be born again." You must have a trusting faith in Jesus.

IV.

In vv. 67-71 JESUS PRESENTS THE CHALLENGE TO BE COMMITTED DISCIPLES. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. JESUS PRESENTS THE...) We read in v. 67, **“So Jesus said to the Twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’”** The Greek grammar implies a negative answer: “You don’t want to go away also, do you?” The question also implies that there has been a significant defection. Most of the crowd may have left.

Perhaps it was the experience and witness of this scene that was a partial motivation for the Apostle John to later write in his first epistle (1 JOHN 2:19) in #2 v. 19 about people who merely seemed to be Christians, **“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”**

Occasionally that happens in churches today--- a little difficulty comes along in the life of the congregation, and someone, or some ones, drop out. They don’t just switch to another church, but they stop going to church altogether. You have to wonder about the nature of their discipleship. Are they really believers?

Verse 68: **“Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life...’”** Peter often acts as the spokesman for the apostles. Often he put his foot in his mouth. But he had a genuine commitment to follow Jesus. He had given up his day job to follow Jesus around the countryside. He had burned his bridges.

In the movie version of *The Hunt for Red October*, a disillusioned submarine commander is given charge of taking a new Russian submarine on its maiden voyage. Commander Markos Ramius picked the other officers for the submarine who also are unhappy with the Soviet government. So they plan to defect and to take this new submarine with them. There is a discussion about this in the officers’ mess that goes like this: (EXCERPT FROM THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER)

That is the kind of commitment that Peter had made. That is the kind of commitment that Jesus desires from us. It is worth the commitment because Jesus has words of eternal life. Work and sports and hobbies and entertainment and friends and family all have their place. But to have an assurance of



eternal life and to make others aware of the opportunity to have eternal life is worth a commitment, a commitment that burns bridges and burns ships.

Peter continues in v. 69, “**...and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.**” The only other use of this title of Jesus comes from the mouth of a demon in Mark #1 v. 24 (Luke 4:34). It is a correct description.

Peter and his cohorts recognize that Jesus is the Messiah. Their understanding of that is limited. They do not yet have any comprehension about the coming death and resurrection of Jesus. But they are convinced that Jesus is the Messiah, that He is from God and that He is worth following. They have risked everything to follow Him.

Verse 70: “**Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.’**” Jesus is again making a claim to omniscience--- to being all-knowing--- and to be sovereign in His choices. The mystery is that He has picked a devil. The original Greek term means literally “accuser.” The reference is to Judas Iscariot.

Verse 71 is a side note from the Apostle John: “**He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the Twelve, was going to betray him.**” John would learn about this only later. At the time the other apostles had no clue. Judas, along with the rest of the Twelve, had recently been given miraculous ability to heal people. In fact, Judas had been entrusted with carrying the money that the group had.

Why did Jesus pick Judas, if He knew that this one would be a betrayer? Partly it was to fulfill Old Testament prophecies that had been made about a betrayer. Partly it was to show the depth of the love of Jesus toward the people for whom He would die. Partly it was a warning to future Christians that there could be people like this in their churches and their Christian organizations. Truly committed disciples will persevere in the face of betrayers.

Eternal salvation is a gift that cannot be earned or deserved. It can only be accepted by faith. Being a committed disciple requires effort on our part. A seminary professor visited northern Uganda in Africa some years ago. At the time there was a group called the Lord’s Resistance Army which was terrorizing the countryside. Among other things, it would kidnap children and force them into serving their army.

To stay alive and to avoid being captured and forced to become child soldiers, many children--- often whose parents were dead--- would sleep together in camps. One night this professor saw hundreds of children come to sleep together in an empty school. Only one adult was present, a middle-aged woman who make herself available to help and comfort anyone who might have need. Her husband and children were at home a few blocks away. She explained that she came each night as a volunteer to do what she could.

The seminary professor asked why she was doing this. She spoke about the need of the children and her desire to do what she could under difficult circumstances and in the face of such danger. Still he asked her, **“But what motivates you to care? Why do you do it?”** She replied, **“Well, I am what you call a Christian. I read my Bible every day, and every week I go to a church where we eat something called the Lord’s Supper. I can’t imagine doing those things all my life and not coming here. Where else would it lead?”**

That’s what a committed disciple looks like. Biblical commitment means a dedication to God’s Word and serving where the Lord directs. Perhaps it means even helping out at Vacation Bible School in hundred degree weather.