



## 4) Is Hard to Swallow Without the Spirit

A major potato chip company once came up with a clever marketing slogan. "Bet you can't have just one." And it made for some pretty funny tv commercials. The idea was that if someone would just try one, the whole bag would be gone because they'd love it so much. If you've ever had a salty potato chip you know how that happens. Why doesn't it work this way in spiritual matters? Shouldn't God be able to say, "If you just have one teaching, one taste of the truth, you'll want it all." Yet why is it that some Christians crave more of God's Word, but others end up dismissing it and no longer wanting any more of it? We conclude our series on John 6 as Jesus reminds us of an important truth: The Bread of Life is hard to swallow without the Spirit.

Jesus did much more than feed the crowd bread and fish. With his life-giving word he had fed the crowd living bread. He shared his gospel with them. And he continued to feed everyone gathered the next day at the Synagogue in Capernaum. He taught himself as the living bread that comes down from heaven. The extraordinary claim he made was that he was the holy life-giving Messiah who would offer up his flesh for the life of all the world. And Jesus told them the wonderful benefits of this incredible spiritual food: life eternal. All who partake and believe will be raised to life from their graves. We heard him finish last week by saying he's the only source of such spiritual food. This amazing spiritual meal had been served to everyone at that synagogue. And it was prepared and served by the perfect chef himself, Jesus.

But the crowds weren't exactly polite dinner guests. It says that the unbelieving Jews argued sharply among themselves. Like a spoiled child they pushed aside the plate and refused it. But then again, another group was in the synagogue with Jesus: his own disciples. Jesus' own twelve disciples had just gone on a preaching tour. Only a few days earlier they returned from teaching and performing miracles. Jesus also had a large following of other disciples. Many of them would have been part of the crowd which followed him across the lake, ate the loaves, and searched for him afterward. These were the disciples who would have sat and listened to his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. They would have heard the teachings and parables of Jesus and witnessed his miraculous healings. Many would have been baptized by John or by one of Jesus' twelve disciples. They all called him teacher, Rabbi. If the unbelieving Jews in the synagogue were guests at his dinner, then these disciples of Jesus were family. How would his own disciples take his teaching?

His loyal followers were working to choke down what Jesus had just given them to swallow. "This is a hard teaching," they said. "Who can accept it?" They had received the Bread of Life. They nibbled on it for a little while and then began to complain. Soon many were pushing aside their plates as they spurned the Word of Christ. "I can't accept this? Who could?" This particular visit to the synagogue would end up being a turning point in Jesus' ministry. It doesn't say that one or two of his disciples had trouble. It says that when they heard his teaching on the Bread of Life many of his disciples had trouble swallowing it. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him."

Jesus could see them leaving, but he won't leave them without one final teaching. "Does this offend you?" he asks. Jesus, of course, already knew the answer. He knew who believed in him and who didn't. In fact, Jesus already knew which one of his twelve disciples would betray him. The point of this question is to lead into a teaching point. If his coming down from heaven offends them how much more won't the rest of his teaching be offensive to them? He wasn't even finished teaching them all there was to know! He had spoken of himself coming down from heaven. They were offended that he claimed to be someone who came down from heaven and was living in the flesh. They were offended that he said he would give his flesh for the life of the world. How would they ever believe if he also told them of his glorification, his rising to life and ascending into glory?

Faith in Jesus is an all or nothing deal. You either have faith that he is the Son of God who came down from heaven to live and die for the world's sin or you don't. There is no middle ground or half-way faith. Either you believe all that he says is truth, or you don't believe anything he says. To be his disciple is to eat the food he serves, to believe the gospel he shares. If someone considers themselves a disciple of Jesus that person has to set aside all their own personal ideas and notions of what is true and what is false. As his disciples everything we have must yield to Jesus in the end -all our heart, all our soul, all our mind.

But that's not how it plays out, is it? Jesus explains why. There is a part of the human heart which struggles to be a disciple of Jesus. "The flesh counts for nothing." Jesus refers to the flesh as something opposed to the Holy Spirit and truth. He is using the word flesh the same way the apostle Paul often used it, sometimes its translated as "the sinful mind." It is the heart of man which is opposed to God. The fallen heart, mind, and will of mankind is what all people have by nature. Jesus had told Nicodemus, "flesh gives birth to flesh." Everyone who is born into this world, whether he is a Harvard professor or president of the United States has this sinful mind. "It counts for nothing." You and I can do nothing when it comes to spiritual matters. In fact, the sinful mind takes the bread of life and rejects it as too hard to accept. It is the flesh that caused so many of Jesus' disciples to turn aside and no longer follow him.

How then could we ever swallow divine teaching and spiritual truth? "The Spirit counts. The Spirit gives life." Note that we don't have to go hunting for the Spirit or conjure it up in ourselves. He tells us where the Spirit is active. "The Words I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." The words of Christ are Spirit-filled and life-giving. These are what takes that sinful mind which would

reject God's Word and give us a new heart of faith. By the working of the Holy Spirit through the gospel the mind of sinful man is brought to faith in Christ. We swallow his Word. And it is good. And with that first taste we long for more.

But still, Jesus could see that not all of his disciples had faith. As true God he could see more than just the fact that some had been following him and listening to his teaching. He knew which had taken their sinful flesh and reason and put it over his Word. He saw the heart of his disciples. "Yet there are some of you who do not believe." That's why they were deserting him. That's why John says, "many of his disciples turned aside and no longer followed him."

You and I have seen this happen many times, haven't we? There are those who once followed Jesus, once called him teacher, who have at some point turned aside from following him. We see that hearing the Word doesn't automatically make you a disciple of Jesus. Nor does becoming a disciple mean that you will remain automatically a disciple for life. There are many who at one point followed Jesus, but then they choke on his word and spit it out. Disciples of Jesus can end up responding to the Bread of Life by saying, "I can't accept that." And they may not first choke on Jesus' divinity or the means of grace but perhaps they choke on some other point. They may say, "I can't accept the Jesus who doesn't teach evolution." Or "I can't accept a Jesus who says he has authority over me and says what I'm doing is wrong." And rejecting his teaching and his Word, they reject the only spiritual food that could ever bring them to God.

And it's a heart-wrenching loss when they turn aside from following their Savior and Lord! We see disciples of Jesus we know turning aside from worship and Bible Study. Maybe this includes someone who once was a disciple of Jesus at this church or another church you know, and that person stopped following Christ. For some of you this includes even your spouse, your sons and daughters, friends, and neighbors. This is a hard thing! Jesus knows how this is. He knows what it is like when someone abandons the faith even after confessing it with you for so long. And his heart aches at it! As many disciples desert Jesus, we see the words of prophecy in Psalm 55 fulfilled. "*If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.*" (Ps 55:12-14)

Why do some reject him? The answer is most frightening for all of us. There lies that haunting truth that we all see within us. The times you stand in fearful awe of the truth we confess. "Could God really take on flesh and live among us? Could this world really have been made by the Creator with the appearance of age and only be less than 10,000 years old? Could this bread and wine really also be according to his Word Jesus' body and blood given for me for forgiveness of sins? Could this water and Word really have such power to wash away sins and save young and old alike? Could it really be so important for me to come to church regularly and confess my faith with fellow believers?" Brothers and sisters in Christ. Many of his disciples have deserted him as they gave their own answers to these questions. They ate only with their sinful reasoning.

How should we respond to this bread of life? Without God's intervention, we only spit it out in disgust. If Jesus' words are Spirit-filled and life-giving then why don't all those who hear his Word have life? Because of their own reasoning. Because of their own ideas. With his flesh as his guide, a disciple of Jesus finds his Words hard, and rejects it. And like Pharaoh who we read about earlier this morning, their heart is hard. When you find something in God's Word is taught that is hard to swallow... what do you do? You're tempted to say, "That's not what I think." You might want to say, "That's not what I grew up learning or believing." You could then sinfully conclude, "I need to find a different church -one that agrees with what I think." Or do you stick with the Spirit and the Word that gave you life, and then ask with no trust in self but only in God, "Where must I go for truth?"

Yes, many have turned aside from Jesus' Word. But not all of them. The spiritual food Jesus shared was not all wasted. The Words he had spoken were Spirit and Life! He who came to give his flesh did indeed come from heaven. And he who gave his life for the life of the world did indeed rise to life. It's hard to believe it! It is too good to be true. But the Spirit overturns the heart of sin to believe it true. Jesus knew this. The same bread of life shared that day has been shared throughout all history as God reveals his saving grace in Christ Jesus. Many disciples left and followed their sinful reasoning. But not all.

Jesus turned to the twelve. He already knew the answer. He already knew who would betray him and who would not. But he asks them a question in order to provide an opportunity for the Spirit to now speak through them. "You don't want to leave too, do you?" Peter didn't try to judge hearts. He left that up to the Lord. He freely and gladly confessed the truth. And he knew the same Spirit who worked faith in his heart had done that for others. "Lord to whom shall we go?" Peter was speaking by the Spirit, he was drawn by the Father to his Son. "We have come to know and believe that you are the Holy One of God."

And by that same Spirit-Filled, life-giving Word of Christ you have life. With it we can confess together, "Yes, Jesus is true God who came down from heaven to live as a humble man. Yes, I am a child of God through his life and death. Yes, I was washed and born again of water and the Spirit in baptism. Yes, I have received his body and blood to eat and drink for forgiveness of sins. Yes, he who created this world in six days will judge it in one to come. Yes, the man who died is the Son of God who will return in glory to call me out of my grave." None of this makes sense. But we believe it by the Spirit's working.

What does a disciple do with the Bread of Life? Were we left to our own we'd have one taste and wouldn't want any more of him. We'd reject him. But his Words are Spirit-filled and life-giving. Because of that we say together with Peter and all Jesus' disciples led by his Spirit around this world, "We have come to know and believe you are the Holy One of God."