

28. THE TALE OF TWO MEALS (6:51-59)

We now come to an interesting and difficult portion in the gospel, a portion that has been incorrectly interpreted and misapplied many times. We will explore some of those in this study.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Re-read the last sentence of verse 51. According to this statement, for whom did Jesus give His life?

To begin, can you imagine what the Jews think as they hear Jesus' words? Because remember where and who they are. They are sitting in the synagogue in Capernaum, and these are the religious leaders of the community that Jesus is addressing. What He says is truly shocking to them.

Why? Well not only is it undesirable or unhealthy to eat human flesh, but it goes against Jewish law. However, if you look up cannibalism in the Bible, you will not find any direct command stating, "Thou shall not eat another human being". So where do the Jews get the idea that it is forbidden? There are three basic lines of argument.

1. After the global flood, God gave Noah and all mankind permission to eat meat, before then they (and all animals) were vegetarians. He said in Genesis 9:3, "*Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything*". However, God specifies that the "*food for you*" does not include human beings, for in verse 6 we learn that people are to be treated differently from the animals. God said, "*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image*". This means that we cannot take the life of another human being and we have them for dinner. But what if a Jew happens to come across a dead person, could he then eat that person? After all, he did not take their life. Well, no he can not, because in Numbers 19:13 it states that if a Jew touches a dead body, he or she is considered ceremonially unclean for seven days. So logically if a Jew cannot touch a dead body, then how worse would it be to eat a dead person.
2. Every time cannibalism is referred to in Scripture it is seen in a negative light and as undesirable. In passages such as Leviticus 26, Jeremiah 19, and Ezekiel 5, the practice is regarded as a curse and as an inhuman act of desperation. Moses and the prophets predicted that if the Israelites abandoned God that they would fall into such awful humiliation so as to cannibalise their own children. Unfortunately, these prophecies were fulfilled during the siege of Samaria during the reign of King Jehoram in 2 Kings 6.
3. Every law that the Jews were to obey, were instituted to differentiate them from their pagan neighbours and for Israel to not worship God in the same way that the pagans worshipped their deities. Since the pagans practised cannibalism, it stands to reason that the Jews should not.

However, eating flesh is only part of their horror. After all, they were to eat the flesh of the sacrificial lambs every Passover. There is nothing wrong with flesh in itself, and as horrid as eating the flesh of a human is, it is not as clearly forbidden as what Jesus tells them to do in verses 53 to 56, that is, to drink His blood. That is something absolutely forbidden in Jewish Law, even the blood of animals (see Lev. 17:10-11). Yet here is a Jew from Galilee whose family these people know, telling them not only to eat His flesh but also to drink His blood. This is something truly scandalous for them.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. In verse 53 and following, Jesus uses very graphic and shocking words to describe what we must do as a response of faith. Why do you think He used such words knowing they would be taken as offensive?
2. The reason why the Jews were not to consume blood is provided in Leviticus 17:11 and 14. Based on this and other passages like Hebrews 10:1-18, what then is the true significance of not being allowed to consume blood.

So what then is Jesus talking about? What is going on in this passage?



A LITERAL, PHYSICAL MEAL (V52)

This is essentially a repetition of the attitude displayed throughout this chapter as the crowd chases after Jesus for another free lunch. Here we read that, *“The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’”*. The Jews just do not understand nor believe (cp. vv36 & 45). They fail to see that Jesus is talking about something beyond the physical realm and not according to worldly wisdom – Paul refers to this kind of thinking in 1 Corinthians 2:14.

But this misunderstanding did not end with these Jews. Because in the first century, one of the main reasons why the Romans persecuted the church is because they thought Christians were literally eating human flesh and drinking human blood in communion services. They failed to see and understand the symbolism and so thought that the Christians were violating what the Romans considered as civilised.

This misunderstandings continues even to this day with two incorrect views of communion still prevalent in the church.



Transubstantiation

A belief held by the Roman Catholic Church. This is the view that during the communion, the bread literally, though invisibly, becomes Jesus’ flesh and the wine literally becomes His blood when the priest blesses the elements and says, *“This is My body”*. So when the elements are consumed, Roman Catholics believe that they are consuming Jesus’ physical body and blood.

Furthermore, these elements become objects of worship, as they are thought to be God Himself physically present. This is seen in every Roman Catholic church by means of an elaborately decorated vessel

called a monstrance (see image), which is a tower-like structure, usually in the shape of a sunburst and often with a cross on it. Housed within it, behind a small glass window, is what is referred to as the consecrated host, that is, a piece of unleavened wafer from the mass that they believe has undergone transubstantiation to become a piece of Jesus' literal body.



They also believe that the elements are a sacramental means of obtaining the grace of Jesus Christ. Therefore, those who hold to this view take Jesus' statements here in John 6 literally and believe that they are saved and sustained by His physical body. According to the book, *Catholicism for Dummies*,

“The physical act of eating the consecrated host or drinking the consecrated wine from the chalice, a blessed cup, is secondary to the underlying invisible reality that the human soul is being fed by the very body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. The body merely consumes the appearances of bread and wine while the soul receives Christ personally and totally”.

No wonder that even in the modern world some accuse Christians of being cannibals.



Consubstantiation

The second incorrect view is that held by Lutheran, some Eastern Orthodox, Anglican and Church of England churches. This view differs in that the bread does not become Jesus' flesh, but rather co-exists with the body of Christ so that the bread is simultaneously bread, and the body of Jesus. The same thing is said of the wine – it does not become the blood of Jesus, but co-exists with the blood of Jesus so that the wine is both wine, and the blood of Jesus.

Consubstantiation essentially teaches that Jesus is, “with, in, and under” the bread and wine, but is not literally the bread and wine. In other words, Jesus is present in the elements, and so when they eat or drink the physical elements, they consume Jesus along with them.

Theological Error

Both these views are wrong for several reasons, the main one being that they take Jesus' words here in John chapter 6 literally. They have made the same mistake as the Jews in verse 52, and ignore what Jesus says later that confirms that He is not talking literally – “*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*” (v63). In other words, the true meaning behind His figurative language is that it pertains to the spiritual and not physical. In fact, Jesus says that, “*the flesh is no help at all*”. This means that there is no need for transubstantiation or consubstantiation because He is not referring to us literally eating His flesh. And even if He was, it would mean nothing, for as we have seen twice already in this chapter, physical eating has no spiritual benefit at all.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY



1. How have you typically understood Jesus' command to eat His flesh and drink His blood? Have you held to either of the above literal views or something similar?

So if it is not a literal, physical meal, what is it? This brings us to the second meal.



A METAPHORICAL, SPIRITUAL MEAL (VV53-59)

What Jesus is doing in our text by saying that we are to eat His flesh and drink His blood is to use His body and blood as pictures of something else. In this case salvation that would be achieved by His physical death.

There are three reasons in the text that support this.

1. **Repetition:** As we have seen throughout the gospel so far, Jesus tends to teach truth in layers, repeating the same point in different ways or with different images. For example, in chapter 3 He refers to being "*born again*", and being "*born of water and the Spirit*" – two different terms, but both mean the same thing. Here in chapter 6 He refers to Himself as the "*Bread of Life*", then elaborates by saying He is the "*Living Bread*", and finally states that the bread is His flesh. Similarly He refers to Himself as "*Living Water*", and then tells them to drink His blood. Different terms, or metaphors, but all with the same meaning.
2. **John's use of the word, "Life":** In verse 53 Jesus warns the Jews that they will not have life in themselves unless they eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood (see John's repetition of the principle in 1 John 5:13). But the life that Jesus and John are talking about is not physical life here on earth, but eternal life. This is how John uses the word life throughout his writings. A good example of this is in John 11:25 where Jesus says that He is "*the resurrection and the life*". This eternal life was secured for us when Jesus gave Himself for our sins (cf. Gal. 1:3-5) through His death on the cross when He sacrificed His body and blood.
3. **Greek words for "eat" and "drink":** They are in what is known as the aorist tense – that is, they refer to an act that is done only once and not repeatedly. In this case, eat once, and do not eat again, drink once, and do not drink again. But according to the two views, each time communion is held, people repeatedly eat Jesus' body, and essentially crucify Him over and over again. However, Jesus sacrifice was a one time act (cf. Heb. 10:11-14). This further implies that not only is the cross a one time event, but so is your salvation, a fact that is confirmed with the rest of the New Testament. Jesus died once and we are saved once. This means that one does not need to attend mass every day nor respond to every altar call made to be saved or maintain one's salvation. Believers are saved once through Christ's once-for-all death on the cross, and will continue to believe until they leave this earth (cf. Heb. 3:14).

Biblical Metaphor



We typically understand a metaphor to be a comparison between two items.

However, to use a metaphor, especially in a biblical sense, is to name or describe one thing in terms of a second, in order to express the truth of the first through the second.

Therefore based on the above, Jesus cannot be saying that in order to have life one must physically eat His flesh and drink His blood as if the action of eating grants eternal life. This is part of the problem with both the Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation views – both imply that through eating one is saved. Because as we know, the New Testament repeatedly teaches that salvation is not earned by works and that no one can do anything to earn salvation.

Furthermore, in both cases it is taught that regular eating is necessary to maintain eternal life. But nowhere in the New Testament do we read that the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper assures us of our salvation, nor that it is a requirement to stay saved. In fact, even Jesus promises in verse 54 that He will sustain believers and raise them up on the last day. This is a clear contradiction to these two views (see also vv39 & 40). Again, Jesus is teaching truth in layers, as in three verses He has mentioned groups of people being raised, and all three groups are the same people, just with different descriptions – those whom the Father gives Him, those who believe, and those who are saved through His death. And in each case, His promise is the same, He will sustain them to the end.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Why does Jesus call Himself the “*Son of Man*” in verse 53?
2. Why do you think Jesus used figurative language when it probably would have been easier to just communicate His meaning without figures of speech? (Tip: Mat. 13:10-17; Luke 8:10)
3. In John 1:29, John the Baptist declared when He saw Jesus, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*”. How are those words being fleshed out here? (See also 1Co. 5:7)

Herein lies one's assurance of remaining saved, the promise of Jesus that He will keep you. As a believer, Jesus will keep you to the end. You will not fall away, nor will you be snatched out of His hand as Jesus says in 10:28. This idea is further strengthened in verse 56 with the word abide. The Greek word is *menō*, meaning “to remain”. In other words, those who believe in Jesus will remain in Jesus. They will never lose their salvation.



By now you may be asking, “But how can I know that I am saved? It is great to know that He will sustain those who are saved, but how do I know I am one of them”. Good question, and the answer is relatively simple – by observing the fruit of a changed life. Things like love, obedience, and delighting in God's Word, serve as signs that you have eternal life.



In John's first epistle, he writes so that “*you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life*”. Throughout the letter he provides several tests one can apply to one's life to see if they are truly saved. These can be grouped into the following three main tests:

1. **The doctrinal test:** Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh? (1:5-2:2; 2:12-27; 3:23-4:6; 4:13-18)
2. **The ethical test:** Does your life reflect growing obedience to Christ? (2:3-6; 2:28-3:10; 5:1-5)
3. **The relational test:** Does your life reflect growing, practical love for others? (2:7-11; 3:11-18; 4:19-21)



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Have you ever wrestled with uncertainty over your salvation? How have you tried to deal with it in the past? How do Jesus' words here, and the tests provided in 1 John, help you overcome that uncertainty?
2. Jeremiah 17:9, tells us that "*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*" This implies that we cannot truly understand our hearts. How then does one come to see the evil in their hearts, or recognise any good from God? (Tip: see Psa. 139)

Jesus will sustain those who are is through to the end, and their lives will reflect a life changed. All of this is only possible because Jesus is the true food and the true drink (v55). In other words, as we have seen in the previous sections, He is the bread and wine that comes down from heaven who will not perish.

There is one question that remains to be answered – Is this passage talking about communion? No, it does not for at least three reasons:

1. This meal is not to be understood literally but metaphorically as seen above. It is a picture of the salvation that Jesus would later secure on the cross. While communion looks back to the finished work of the cross, this passage looks forward to it.
2. Jesus is talking about a one-time act and not something that needs to be repeated, as we have also seen. But communion, is not a one-time act, but something we re commanded to do until the Lord returns.
3. One additional point to consider is the timing. Jesus only initiated the Lord's Supper on the night before His death, as seen in the other gospels. Even Paul in Corinthians 11 refers to that night, and there is nothing else anywhere in the New Testament that connects this event in John 6 to communion itself. At best, this is a stepping stone in the disciples training that highlights the significance of communion as it points ultimately to His death.

However, that does not mean this text has no place in discussing the communion as it provides the meaning behind the meal. The book of Hebrews references how God uses the physical things to help us understand, remember, and apply spiritual truth. Hebrews 8:5 says that some tangible things on earth,

“serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things”. The chapter goes on to explain that the Old Covenant which was concerned with physical rites and ceremonies, was replaced by the New Covenant in which God’s laws are written on our hearts (8:10; cf. Jer. 31:33). Therefore, whenever you come around the Lord’s Table, remember what it is that Jesus has done for you and let passages like this remind you of the truths of salvation.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION OR STUDY

1. Let’s pull everything Jesus has said so far in John 6 together (esp. vv40, 47, and 54). What is He saying is the source and means of “eternal life”? How are we to respond to this?
2. Likewise, what do we learn about God the Father from the following verses in John 6? (see vv37; 39-40; 45-46, and 57)