

**September 10, 2006**  
**Pentecost 14**

*"The Hard Sayings of Jesus"*

**JOHN 6:60-69**

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**U**n hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" <sup>61</sup> Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! <sup>63</sup> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. <sup>64</sup> Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. <sup>65</sup> He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him." <sup>66</sup> From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. <sup>67</sup> "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

How would modern marketing experts rate the success of Jesus' ministry? Large crowds followed Jesus when he fed 5000 people miraculously. Then the numbers dropped off dramatically as Jesus began to teach the people the truth about himself with words such as "I am the bread of life" and "I am the true bread come down from heaven." Even larger numbers turned away from Jesus when he taught the truth that they needed to eat of his flesh and blood for eternal life. By this Jesus meant they needed to trust in the forgiveness of sin he would provide for them in his body that was broken and his blood that was shed. Marketing experts gave Katie Couric high marks for her debut on CBS Evening News. Jesus would get low marks, even an "F" for turning people off with his controversial statements about being God, and being the only way that people can be saved.

Why are people turned off to Jesus teachings? All human beings are born with this ingrained thinking that considers it repulsive to believe in someone who claims he is God and also claims he did everything necessary to save you. We were all born into this world singing our favorite song, the mantra of our lives, "I'll do it my way!"

Permit an example from the game of golf to make the point more clear. Imagine for a moment that you are getting ready to do some golfing at Rancho Santa Maria. You practice driving a few balls, chipping a few and putting on the green. While you are intensely involved in trying to improve your game, a person is looking at you. He wears a Nike cap and red golf shirt. Immediately you recognize him as Tiger Woods. How happy you would be if he offered you a few pointers to improve your game of golf. But how would you react if he told you that your swing, and your chip shot, and your putting were the worst he had ever seen, and that you would be a disgrace on the course? He even offers to play the game for you. Even though you respect the man and have always liked the way he conducts himself, he has just insulted you and made you feel like dirt, and then proudly said he would play the game for you.

Jesus tells people the truth about their lives. He tells us that we do not have life that is

worthy of God's love on our own. He tells us that we need to put our trust in the perfect life he lived for us, and the perfect death he died for us. This is a hard saying that turns some people off. Yet for others these words are the most beautiful words you can ever hear. They are the words that give eternal life.

### **Some can't stomach the words of Jesus**

Even some of Jesus' loyal followers could not stand to hear him describe himself as the only hope of eternal life for people. They did not like to hear the words, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." We are told, "On hearing it, many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" They were willing to follow Jesus closely if he provided them with material blessings such as bread to eat. They did not mind if Jesus described himself as the bread of life, as long as he was there to help them improve their lives and give them the strength they needed to make themselves acceptable to God. When Jesus made the exclusive claim that they need to eat or trust his body that would be broken and his blood that would be shed for them, they started walking away from Jesus in large numbers. It was not that they did not understand what Jesus was saying. They understood exactly what he said and wanted nothing to do with it that they walked away.

Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, did not like some of these sayings of Jesus either. Instead of walking away from the Bible and or putting it on a shelf and never opening it again, Jefferson cut out all the sayings of Jesus he did not like and made his own Bible. It was Mark Twain who said, "It is not the parts of the Bible I cannot understand that bother me, it is the parts of the Bible I do understand."

Jesus heard the grumbling. He could see the rejection welling up in their hearts. He asks them, "Does this offend you?" The word for offend is "skandolon" from which we get our English word scandal. It has the thought of a trigger for a trap. When I was child we had mice move into the large farmhouse in the fall of the year and they needed to be trapped. The mice would smell the cheese or peanut butter on the trigger of the trap, touch it with their noses, and then they were crushed immediately. The words of Jesus triggered a response in these people that led them to reject what Jesus had told them and consider it to be foolishness and nonsense.

If these people were offended or trapped by Jesus word about his flesh and blood saving them, they would be even more offended by greater miracles that were coming in the future. "What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!" Jesus' death, Jesus' resurrection from the dead and Jesus' ascension into heaven are mighty miracles that demand a response from people. These miracles challenge our whole world view and demand that we accept the miracles of Jesus that rescued us or totally reject them. When Paul preached about Jesus resurrection to the intellectuals in Athens they condescendingly sneered at him. They could not stomach the exclusive claims that Jesus' resurrection makes for us. Peter said in his epistle that either Jesus is a living stone on which you build your hope, or stone that crushes you because your unwillingness to accept it in your life.

In the Bible I am holding in my hand, the words of Jesus are in red letters. Many of these words are hard sayings, filled with controversy. In John 8 Jesus makes an exclusive claim,

"Before Abraham was, I am." With these words he calls himself Lord and God. In John 14 Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man comes to the Father except through me." Here in John 6 he claims he is the bread of life and that people need to eat his flesh and drink his blood, accept his suffering for sin, or not have eternal life. The simple words of John 3:16 are also very controversial. "God so loved the world...." These words imply that without believing in Christ there is no eternal life.

Why is it that some people cannot stomach these hard words of Jesus and others relish them as the sweetest words they have ever heard? Jesus gives us the answer when he says, "The Spirit gives life and the flesh counts for nothing." My human flesh with which I was born counts for nothing. It will always fall back into believing that there is something I must do to contribute to my future after I die. How true are the words of Isaiah 59 that tell us, "Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes." Paul speaks about the natural condition that will not accept God's plan in 1 Corinthians 2 where it says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

Several years ago, someone wrote in to Heloise to ask which side of the aluminum foil you use to bake a potato, the shiny side or dull side. She wrote back that it made no difference. Both sides are the same. Then she added a personal note that said she wished all religions would get along and believe that it makes no difference what side you are on because all truths are equal. Relativism says there is no right or wrong. Pluralism accepts all religions as equal. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." There is no other way to be saved. The words of Jesus are hard sayings, hard sayings that can only be swallowed and accepted if the Holy Spirit opens your heart to believe in things that ordinarily you would consider to be foolishness and nonsense. As Jesus tells us, "The Spirit gives life." "The flesh accounts for nothing."

### **Others can't get enough of the words of Jesus**

What a contrast there was between those who can't stomach the words of Jesus and those who cannot get enough of what he is telling them. Why did some reject and some stay with Jesus? Jesus reminds those who were faithful why they were still following him. It was not some special goodness in them. "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father enables him." The only reason even a small handful still followed Jesus is because the heavenly Father was enabling them to believe. A better translation of the word for "enable" would be "give." In fact the word in the Greek is always used as "give." There is a big difference between enabling and giving. Enabling implies cooperating. A gift is something totally free. When Peter confessed his faith in Jesus, Jesus told, "Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father which is in heaven." "By grace you have been saved, through faith, it is gift of God not of works lest anyone should boast."

As hard as it was for Jesus to see all these people walk away, there was a bright spot in his ministry that day. He asked his close disciples, the Twelve, "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Peter responds with these words, "Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." This reminds us of another confession from Peter in Matthew 16 where he said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The devil will do everything in his power to take our eyes off of

Jesus. He will try to turn us back to ourselves and to how we live our lives as the source of salvation. He will try to turn us back to sinful ways of the past, and even lead us to justify what we are doing. He will try to get our focus on the material things of this life and make them more important than Jesus. In our low moments he will try to drive us to despair. What a great prayer we have in these words of Peter, "Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life."

We close with these words: "In Christ we have a love that can never be fathomed; a life that can never die; a righteousness that can never be tarnished; a peace that can never be understood; a rest that can never be disturbed; a joy that can never be diminished; a hope that can never be disappointed; a glory that can never be clouded; a light that can never be darkened; a happiness that can never be interrupted; a strength that can never be enfeebled; a purity that can never be defiled; a beauty that can never be marred; a wisdom that can never be baffled; and resources that can never be exhausted." "Lord to whom shall we turn, you have the words of eternal life."