

“The Aroma of Life and Death”

John 6:60-71

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Text Comment

- v.60 Just as in the Gospel of John there is faith and then there is faith, that is faith of a sort and the true and living faith in Christ that brings salvation, so there are disciples and disciples. There were many who were following Jesus enthusiastically who, events would prove, were not truly and genuinely his followers. Cf. v. 52 with v. 60. It isn't just men insofar as they are Jews who had trouble with the Lord Jesus' teaching, but a number of those who had been enthusiastic about him at first. For John, as one commentator puts it, the dividing line is never race, but only what response one makes to Jesus [Carson, 300].
- v.62 As we saw at 3:14, in the Gospel of John, “ascending,” “being lifted up” refer to the Lord’s death on the cross *as the means of his exaltation*. It completes the work he must do in the world and upon its completion he will return to heaven. The thought here then seems to be, “if you find the language of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man offensive, how much more offensive will you find the crucifixion of the man who claims to be the Messiah!” The cross, of course, stands at the very center of God’s plan to redeem his people and to reveal his glory to the world, but the Jews found it a stumbling block and the Gentiles foolishness.
- v.63 This is a difficult statement. Almost certainly the reference to spirit in both instances is a reference to the Holy Spirit and so the second instance of spirit should be capitalized as well. We know already in John of the life-giving spirit and of the Spirit’s role in giving new life, spiritual life in the new birth. The Lord seems to be contrasting the viewpoint of someone who looks at all of this – the Lord’s works and his words – from a worldly, earthly, fleshly perspective and one who has the mind of the Spirit and looks at it all from the vantage point of true faith in Christ. And here, as everywhere in the Bible, one feeds on Christ by believing his words. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. There are always folks and there are many today who want to be considered the followers of Christ but who do not live by what he has said and taught. No, the Lord said, it is by my words and a person’s believing them and acting on them that one comes to have the life that I bring.
- v.65 However great the revelation and the promise, some do not believe. That comes as no surprise to Jesus, of course. The Lord had his eyes wide open regarding how his ministry must play itself out. [Carson, 302] But such is the strength, the tenacity of unbelief, of man’s native rebellion against God, that even being an eyewitness of stupendous miracles will not overcome it. Only the sovereign initiative of divine grace can do that.
- v.67 Now, after the crowds begin to dissipate comes the big test. What will the twelve do, the inner circle? As usual, Peter speaks his mind. It is interesting by the way that John assumes his readers will know what “the Twelve” refers to. The disciples as a group of twelve men have not been mentioned to this point in the Gospel.

- v.68 As you may know, the Greek word “Lord” can mean anything from a polite “sir” to a title for God himself. Peter seems to be using it here with its maximum meaning. Then he shows that he understood the Lord’s point in v. 63. No one who has, by God’s grace, come to know the life-giving words of God as Jesus has spoken them can forsake him for something else.
- v.69 Peter clearly accepts that the claims the Lord Jesus had made about himself were true and must be true. He was the holy one of God come down from heaven.
- v.70 John has not recorded the calling of the individual disciples as the other Gospel writers do, but he assumes the same history. Ordinarily in the Bible, of course, election is eternal and immutable. But there is a kind of election, a lesser election if you will from which it is possible to fall away.
- v.71 Whatever the disciples may have made of that remark about one of them being a devil when Jesus uttered it, John adds the clarification, after the fact, for the sake of his readers.

This paragraph sums up the results of the great discourse on the bread of life that the Lord had just delivered. In that discourse the Lord had made phenomenal claims about himself and phenomenal demands upon those who were hearing him. In the verses we read this morning we are told something about the various responses that people made to the Lord’s claims and demands.

The Bible is a timeless book. It records history that happened thousands of years ago in a world that was in many ways very different from our own. But, the fact is, the human condition, the human heart is no different now than it was in Jesus’ day and in Jesus’ world. People today respond to the message of Jesus Christ, his deity, his coming down from heaven, his suffering and death and resurrection for our salvation, in the very same ways in which they responded to Jesus in person and his message as he delivered it himself. And we have all three of the classic responses represented in this short text.

First, there are those who turn away in unbelief. Many who heard Jesus that day grumbled at what he had said. And so the Lord met their grumbling head on. What he said, of course, did nothing to remove the offense in his previous remarks. If anything it deepened it. He obviously was not a preacher who shaped his remarks to please his audience. As one commentator put it, “What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive.” [F.F. Bruce in Carson, 303] It had looked just hours before as if Jesus were to become the head of an immensely popular movement. The people who had witnessed the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 had wanted to make Jesus their king right then and there. But then, as he spoke, men began to see what Jesus really stood for and they quite suddenly lost interest in him. They heard him say what he really intended to do for them and they were disappointed and their hopes that he might be the man they were looking for were deflated.

They were looking for a political Messiah, a king who would free them from the yoke of servitude to Rome. He offered them instead his flesh to eat. They wanted a leader who would do things for them like Jesus had just done when he multiplied the bread and fish. Instead he required them to believe that he had come down from heaven and to come to him if they would know God. He even had the audacity to claim to be greater than Moses!

This was more than they could stomach. And, as so often the case, they did not merely disagree with Jesus and lose interest in him, they began to despise him for the ways in which he refused to conform to their expectations and preach a message that reflected poorly on their own views and ideas. It would be a very similar situation when the gospel began its course of conquest through the Gentile world after Pentecost. The apostles came preaching a message that was strange to the Roman world, they proposed to answer questions that nobody, or very few people were asking. They preached monotheism in a polytheistic culture, sin and guilt in a worldly society, and redemption through the death of the Son of God in a world that placed its hopes of salvation in knowledge and in power.

And, as in the Lord's public ministry among the Jews, most Gentiles didn't believe either. Three hundred years later, when Constantine recognized Christianity, it is still estimated that only one in ten of the inhabitants of the Roman world were a Christian, though, by that time, many more than that knew what the Christian message was and had been evangelized in some way or another. As Paul put it in 2 Corinthians 2: As surely as the gospel had been an aroma of life to many, if had as surely been an aroma of death to many others.

The problem was the same for the Jews and the Gentiles. For whatever reasons, they were not prepared to believe what Jesus said about himself. Nor were they prepared to commit themselves to him as Jesus said they must. It was not confusion. It was not misunderstanding. The more clearly they grasped the Lord's meaning, the less they liked it. As **Mark Twain**, a notorious unbeliever, once said about the Bible, "It is not the things I don't understand that bother me; it is the things that I do understand."

And there is a great deal in the Bible's teaching, in Christ's own teaching that is very hard for a human being to swallow – sinful and estranged from God as all human beings are by nature. There is a great deal that the gospel demands of him or her that is fundamentally contrary to all the most powerful tendencies of his or her heart. It is no surprise that people do not believe in Jesus Christ.

It did not surprise him. He said it plainly. They will not believe unless the Father who is in heaven draws them. I can do the greatest miracles before their very eyes and they will not believe. He will later say to someone who was challenging him to prove his claims, "I could even come back from the dead and you would not believe in me."

No, let no one think that believing in Jesus is a simple, an easy thing, a natural thing. It is not. It requires nothing less than the exercise of omnipotence to change a human heart so that it will believe in Jesus Christ. So intractable is unbelief, so unwilling is the sinful human heart to trust itself to Jesus Christ, that when the Lord Jesus returns to this world, and all mankind sees him for what he is, the King of Kings, they still will remain his enemies, still not bow humbly before him and seek his mercy.

I am not saying of course that the case for Christian belief is weak. It is not. It is very strong. Indeed it compels belief. And it has been made brilliantly many times over. Just as Augustine and Bishop Butler and William Paley made the case in ages past, so brilliant men have made it in this 20th century, and, frankly, made it even better and more persuasively than before. G. K. Chesterton and, following him, C. S. Lewis, made it one way. Francis Schaeffer and, following

him, Ravi Zacharias have made it in another way. Josh McDowell made it in still another way. Cornelius van Til made it in still another way. And all of them set forth an argument that cannot be easily dismissed. It is a far better argument than the arguments for unbelief, which is why so regularly when the matter is debated -- whether Bertrand Russell, the atheist English philosopher, and Frederick Coppleston, the English Jesuit historian of philosophy debating the existence of God; or Francis Schaeffer and B. F. Skinner debating the nature of man; or John Hick, the English philosopher, and Gary Habermas, the Liberty University professor, on the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus – it is the Christian who is judged to have won the debate, to have made the stronger case.

Still, look around our community and around the world today. When the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God is preached, multitudes turn away in unbelief. The issue does not in fact turn on the evidence. It turns always on the condition of men's hearts and whether the Spirit of God has broken the rebel spirit of man.

But, then, there is another response: that of the disciples.

There are those, at the same time others turn away, who embrace the Lord and the truth he has taught, convinced that he has spoken the truth. Peter hardly knew what he was saying, of course, and subsequent events would demonstrate that there was still much confusion mixed together with their faith. But the disciples knew by this time that their lives, now and forever, were inextricably bound up with this very authentic man who, nevertheless, had come from heaven. They knew that what he said was true, even if they didn't completely understand it. They heard the ring of truth in what he said and they saw the demonstration of his Messiahship in what he did. Their eyes had been opened by the Spirit of God to embrace the words of life that Jesus was speaking to them about himself and about the salvation they could have through him.

They had crossed a Rubicon. They could never turn away from him. They knew their hope of eternal life lay with him and only with him. They had become Christians before anyone had thought to use that name. And so much was this the case, that they remained unmoved from their resolve even by the multitudes who turned away. They were unimpressed by the scorn being heaped upon the Lord by their society's leadership. They were unpersuaded by what we might nowadays refer to as "the climate of opinion." They were willing to stand with Jesus even if no one else did *because they knew he was the Holy One of God.* The Father in heaven had drawn them to Christ and when God draws someone, he comes *and he stays!*

But there was still a third class of people represented in the responses to Jesus recorded in these verses.

There are, finally, those who follow the Lord, but insincerely and temporarily. In a way, in a sermon preached to a congregation of churchgoers, it is this last response, the last group of people represented here that is most interesting. Judas, of course, was one of the twelve disciples. He permitted Peter to speak for him as for the other ten men of that band. So far as anyone knew and, what is more important, so far as Judas himself knew at that moment, he rightfully belonged among the followers of Jesus Christ. He remained, after all, when the multitude left the Lord in disgust over his message. For more than a year after this Judas remained a member in good standing of the apostolic band. There were signs of trouble ahead – he had a penchant for dipping into the money bag that held the funds from which the Lord and his disciples provided food and

shelter for themselves – but apparently none of the other disciples saw those signs or interpreted them correctly.

But, the fact was that Judas was *not* loyal to Jesus. He appeared to be, he thought himself to be, *and he had every reason to be!* He had heard all of the Lord's sermons. He had seen all of his miracles. He lived in the closest proximity to the only sinless and perfectly good human being who has ever lived in this world. He had the constant personal experience of true goodness in daily fellowship with Jesus. In due time, with the other disciples, he would be sent out on tours and would do miracles himself in the Lord's name.

But, all of that notwithstanding, subsequent events would show Judas a turncoat, someone who, at the last, turned away from Jesus also, though from an honored place among the Lord's closest friends and comrades. And how many such people there have been in the church of God through the ages: people who represented themselves as Christians, were accepted by others – at least others in their circle – as Christians, but who betrayed the Lord with kiss and when push came to shove their loyalty to Jesus Christ proved to be nothing but empty words. As the Bible never tires of warning us there are many such folk in the church. Some of them will have their disloyalty smoked out during the course of their lives. Some test of loyalty will come and they will fail it. But others will not be discovered to have been hypocrites until all is said and done and all is made clear at the judgment day. "Depart from me, I never knew you," Jesus will say. And if there are more terrible words in all of the book of God than those, I would like to know which they are!

I received in the mail this past week a questionnaire from an associate pastor of a church in Alabama. This substantial church has been wracked with division apparently, so much so that all but one of its pastors have left. And the nature of the division is apparently revealed in the questions that were being put to various people around the denomination in an attempt to reach some consensus in the church session itself. We were asked to say whether we thought that a man could be disqualified from standing for the office of elder or deacon in the church by the fact that he does not support the church with his gifts. We were asked to say whether we thought a man could be disqualified from election to the office of elder or deacon by the fact that he does not faithfully attend the worship services of the church! And we were asked to say whether we thought that the vows that members of PCA churches take are broken by someone who does not usually attend the worship service on Sunday.

I looked up the statistics for the church in question. It has a membership well over a thousand but a Sunday attendance of 432. It is clear enough what sort of disputes have wracked that church. It has members and it even has officers who resent the suggestion that they must attend the Lord's house on Sunday and must give faithfully to its work.

I shudder to think of what will become of the man or a woman who goes up to the judgment seat of Christ to explain why he was a member of a Christian church but found it too much of a commitment to worship God with the saints on the Lord's Day. I shudder to think of what the Lord Christ will say to that man or that woman who wanted to be known as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus Christ, as his disciple, but, though Jesus spoke of his disciples as leaving all to follow him, he or she was unwilling to part with some of his money for the sake of Christ's church and kingdom. But churches are full of people like that. They always have been. People

who, for some reason, want to be known as Christians, but whose loyalty is not given to Christ, not really.

We cannot read such a text as we have read this morning from the Gospel of John – a book about believing in Jesus Christ – without realizing that we are suppose to find ourselves in one of these three groups of people. ***Are we among those who turn away in unbelief?*** We do not buy the message Jesus preached. We do not accept that he is the Son of God. We are not willing to surrender our lives to his rule. If you find yourself in that group, this morning, my friend, I can do nothing else but urge you to believe that you will be proved wrong in the end, just as these folk were who couldn't stomach the idea that Jesus had come from heaven and was returning there. Be careful, my friend. Think carefully. What reason, really, do you have for refusing to believe an account so self-evidently truthful as this account is? Be very sure that the real reason is not simply that you do not want to believe it. Ask the Lord to show you what is true. Plead with him to reveal himself to you. If the Father must draw a soul to Christ, then beg the Father to draw you!

Or, are we among those who claim to be Christians and think ourselves Christians but whose fundamental loyalty is not given to Jesus Christ? How will we know? How can we know whether we are as Judas or as Peter?

Well, we can know in part by whether when our loyalty is tested in such ways as it is being tested in that church in Alabama. We are willing, cheerful, and enthusiastic supporters of our Savior's name and cause. We not only give we wish we could give more. We not only attend God's house, we love to and find those hours spent in God's presence in the fellowship of the saints the most important and precious hours of our week – the hours we would never willingly omit no matter what else we should have to leave out of our schedule. We can say and mean what the Psalmist said: "May my right hand forget its skill, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy!" and "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord." And we would never imagine that we should think a man qualified to serve in the offices of Christ's church who was not obviously and most ardently committed to the life and work of God's house and people. It boggles our minds to imagine such a thing!

But, still more, we can know by searching our hearts and examining our thoughts when we hear Peter say those magnificent 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." Is that what we believe? Is that what we will say when the test comes and when many others around us are turning away from him? Is it inconceivable to us that salvation could be found in any other name under heaven?

Is it in our hearts to say to the Lord Christ at this very moment: "Lord, even if everyone else forsake you, I will not, I cannot, for you and you alone have the words of life"? "Your words may be someone else's poison, but they are meat to me and always will be!"

Can you say? Would you say that? It is not enough to have Peter say it. Are you giving your own assent to those words in your heart? ***That is what a Christian says! That is what a Christian does! That is who a Christian is!***