



ARE YOU SCANDALIZED BY THIS?

JOHN 6:60-69

Lesson Focus

We are challenged to struggle with the often scandalous nature of Jesus' teachings and their implications for true discipleship.

Lesson Outcomes

Through this lesson, students should:

- Understand the historical and cultural context of Jesus' teachings in John 6:60-69.
- Recognize the difficulty and commitment required to follow Jesus' teachings.
- Reflect on their personal responses to the challenging aspects of Jesus' message.

Catching Up on the Story

After feeding the five thousand, the crowd was so enamored with Jesus that they sought to make him king. John tells us they were about to "take him by force." The crowd's reaction is understandable because of the miracle Jesus had just performed. Israel was under Roman occupation at the time, which came with heavy taxation. Not only that, but the Herodian puppet kings had done nothing to endear themselves to the people. In fact, the exact opposite was true. When a man comes along and provides free food for more than five thousand hungry souls, it makes sense they would want to replace the current regime.

The crowds were hungry, both literally and figuratively. Jesus manages to escape the crowd, withdrawing to a nearby mountain. After the crowd had dispersed, the disciples reached the sea, getting into a boat to cross to the other side of Capernaum. Jesus doesn't immediately join them. A strong wind blew while the disciples were on the water, making the crossing difficult. In the middle of the storm, Jesus joins his friends mid-

journey. John's description of Jesus walking on water is sparse compared to the other gospels. After giving a reassuring word, Jesus hops in the boat, and the group finishes their crossing.

The next day, the crowd returns to the scene only to find the disciples and Jesus gone. Undeterred, they set out on foot to the other side of the water, where they assumed Jesus had gone. Finally catching up to Jesus, the crowd begins questioning Jesus, wanting to know when he had made the journey. Jesus redirects their questions, however, eventually proclaiming that he is the bread of heaven, and whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood will have eternal life. The religious leaders find it hard to believe what Jesus said, the implications of which are blasphemous.

By verse 60, the scene shifts slightly. Presumably, Jesus stopped speaking at the Synagogue in Capernaum and gathered with what might be a smaller group of disciples. What follows appears to be an after-class conversation with those who, for the moment, are most committed to Jesus.

Many...

We cannot say for sure, but those to whom Jesus is now speaking number less than the five thousand plus of the previous days are likely still rather large. John uses two rather telling words, "many" and "disciples." "Many" indicates the size of those with Jesus, and "disciples" clues us into their relative commitment to Jesus. The gathered disciples, which we assume includes the twelve inner disciples, are just as befuddled by the words Jesus speaks as the religious leaders.

Perhaps befuddled isn't the correct term. On some level, these disciples understand Jesus' teaching but are having difficulty accepting it. Remember, Jesus is making some fantastic claims, like having come from heaven as the "I am," the name God gave for himself during the Exodus story. One commentator invites us to set this story in our day and time, "Imagine, for a moment, someone coming to our church and speaking of oneself as having come from heaven, as the great I AM, and as the meal that satisfies forever. Perhaps if we put ourselves in the disciples' place, their reaction will not surprise us as much as it does now" (Bruner, 446).

As humans, when we struggle with something, we talk through it with others. Once again, John connects contemporary Israel with the Israel of the Exodus narrative by telling us that the disciples

2. How does the miracle of feeding the five thousand relate to Jesus' claim about being the Bread of Life?
3. Why do you think the Jewish religious leaders found Jesus' statements so troubling?
4. How does understanding the socio-economic context of Roman rule enhance our interpretation of this passage?
5. What parallels can we draw between the manna given to Israel in the wilderness and Jesus as the Bread of Life?
6. In what ways might we, like the religious leaders, struggle to accept new revelations from God?
7. How can we avoid the grumbling and complaining that Jesus addresses in this passage?
8. What does it mean for us today to "eat the flesh" and "drink the blood" of Jesus?
9. How does the concept of prevenient grace deepen our understanding of being drawn to Jesus by the Father?
10. What practical steps can we take to focus more on Jesus and less on divisive issues within our Christian communities?

Works Cited

Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary: The Churchbook, Matthew 13-28, Revised & enlarged edition (Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).

Marianne Meye Thompson, [*John: A Commentary*](#), First edition, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015).

Don't get me wrong; I affirm the mental agreement needed to follow Jesus and the prayer of confession and repentance. As I grow older, I have become increasingly aware of the difficulty involved with faithfully following Jesus. It's tough, and, if I'm honest, there are plenty of times when I am offended or "scandalized" by the words of Jesus.

There are also plenty of times when I want to rely on my knowledge of and familiarity with scripture and the ways I've interpreted it before, thinking to myself, "Surely, this passage means what I've always thought it meant; there's no need to spend time to rediscover this familiar passage." The problem with this impulse is that it short-circuits the process through which God speaks to us. God speaks to us most often when we are open and receptive to the newness God brings. When we approach Scripture, it can never be with an attitude of puffed-up knowledge. When we do that, we end up using scripture to confirm our biases. It's true that sometimes Scripture confirms what we believe to be true, but it's also true that God speaks shocking and maybe even scandalous things to us through the old words of Scripture. Sometimes, scripture can be a comforting blanket amid a dark and stormy night. Other times, however, it's a bucket of ice and cold water unexpectedly thrown into my face.

Part of the reason we must approach Jesus' words with an attitude of open humbleness is that we are never the same person we were when we last read those words. And the world isn't the same as it was before, either. I'm not saying everyone's interpretations are good, true, or accurate. I am saying that God uses Scripture to transform us and the world around us into something whole and good. Our imaginations are too small to fully grasp God's hopes and dreams for the world. Not only that, but we're too often stuck in our ways and unable or unwilling to allow ourselves to be unstuck by Jesus' words.

Discussion Questions

Read the text aloud. Then, read the text to yourself quietly. Read it slowly, as if you were very unfamiliar with the story.

1. What does Jesus mean when he says, "I am the Bread of Life"?

were complaining or "murmuring." The main question is, who can accept this difficult word Jesus has just spoken? This very same question gets asked by pastors and parishioners alike when confronted with the radical way of the Kingdom of God. For pastors, the question concerns the receptivity their flock, or any visitor to their church, might have to the strange words Jesus speaks. The temptation is to tone down the language, to limit the severity of the denial we're to practice, making the gospel (or even our worship spaces) less of a barrier to a relationship with Jesus and the church. For parishioners, the heart of the matter is their level of commitment. For the good women and men who attend our churches, the temptation is to take only the little bits of Jesus that might get us to heaven, but not the "take up your cross" or "love your enemy" commands.

Let's be honest: following Jesus of Nazareth's ways is difficult. It wasn't the case when Jesus, in human form, walked this earth, and it isn't now.

Knowing what his followers are complaining about, Jesus addresses the crowd with a simple question, "Does this offend you?" It's a simple enough question, but our English translations miss the full force of Jesus' words. The word Jesus uses is the word from which we get scandalized. When someone is scandalized, their belief in something is destroyed. When someone like a faith leader or pastor has a significant moral failure, we are scandalized, and our faith or willingness to follow and support the public figure disappears.

Sometimes, it doesn't need to be a traditional moral failure; simply disagreeing or challenging the status quo can result in significant scandalization. The church today particularly suffers scandalization. The divisive rhetoric that permeates most of our public and religious discourse makes it almost impossible to have a difficult conversation with those who might think or believe differently than we do. In Jesus' case, his mission was to reveal himself as the one for whom Israel had so long waited. He intentionally chose language that connected his current ministry with the major threads of the story of God's interaction with and faithfulness toward Israel. First, the religious leaders have a difficult time accepting what Jesus says, but now, Jesus' followers are struggling.

Shrinking Crowds

Jesus asks a follow-up question aimed at exposing the growing

disbelief of some of his followers. Suppose these disciples have a hard time accepting Jesus' revelation about himself as the one who is the bread of life. In that case, they'll continue to have difficulty even if they see the end of Jesus' earthly mission and his divine vindication in the Resurrection and Ascension. Jesus seems to be saying that when we depend too much on our pre-conceived ideas about God, we become unable to authentically hear from God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.

Verse 63 can cause us some trouble if we aren't careful. With Jesus' talk in previous verses regarding the very physical nature of the salvation Jesus brings, Jesus' declaration that "the flesh is useless" is jarring. We cannot assert that Jesus' language to this point has been entirely metaphorical, so now he takes time to dig at the human body in favor of our souls. Instead, Jesus "is speaking against human ability in the department of God. We are much weaker and more fallible than we can ever appreciate. Faith in Jesus Christ leads believers to a sober estimate of human nature, human capabilities, and themselves." (Bruner, 448). It's not that we see human nature or human flesh as something devoid of any good, but that we are honest with ourselves about our ability to bring about or even fully understand the salvation Jesus brings. More specifically, "the flesh" is useless when it is not submitted to or joined with the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit (Thompson, 162). We must hang onto Jesus' life-giving words.

At this point, Jesus knows the hearts and minds of those who have followed him. He knows their struggle and where that struggle will lead them; though Jesus knows what way these would-be disciples choose, it does not mean that it must happen that way. Jesus reminds us that those who come to simple faith in Jesus are those who the Father has drawn. In previous lessons, we have asserted that all people are being drawn by the Father to saving faith in Jesus. All are invited. All are loved. Not all will respond appropriately.

Verse 66 should make us feel better about ourselves and the church to which we belong or the church in America in general. John tells us that Jesus's scandalous message has caused many to cease following Jesus. If Jesus were a pastor in today's America, many would find themselves scandalized by the message he brings. Jesus' church would start strong because of the miraculous things he did, but when the rubber met the road, many abandoned Jesus and his church. Perhaps we can say that,

according to today's standards, Jesus would be a failed pastor ministering to a rather small congregation fully committed to him. At the very least, we should measure the success of our discipleship/evangelism more against Jesus' success and a lot less against the big church across town. At times, success might look like people leaving our ministry or church.

What About You?

After the would-be disciples begin to abandon Jesus, he turns to the twelve, questioning their commitment, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter responds, speaking for his fellow disciples, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." So often, Peter speaks before he's fully thought through his words, but not this time. We only have a small report of the mass exodus of disciples, but we can assume that it impacted the twelve in significant ways. There's nothing quite like disruptive turmoil that causes a person to deeply reflect upon what they have been told and what they believe. No doubt, the crowd's leaving stirred something in Peter to strengthen his resolve as he followed Jesus. The first part of Peter's statement, "Lord, to whom can we go?" highlights the unique nature of Jesus' mission and message. Peter and his fellow followers have tasted the bread of life, which God continually gives through Jesus, and nothing else will ever measure up.

John closes chapter six with a bit of foreshadowing. Jesus knows who's going to do what, and Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, while not specifically named by Jesus, is marked as the one who will ultimately betray Jesus.

So What?

For a significant portion of my growing up years, even into college, I was led to believe that following Jesus was simple and easy. Well, the focus was on the eternal reward of heaven and not necessarily on the cost of discipleship. Belief meant agreeing that there is a God in heaven and that Jesus came to be one of us, lived, taught, performed some miracles, was crucified, and rose again from the dead three days later. All that was needed was to pray a prayer of confession and repentance, and you were in! Of course, there was always an expectation that the new believer needed to learn and grow into the likeness of Jesus, but the hard work it takes to cooperate with the work of the Spirit in our lives wasn't necessarily disclosed.