

Theme: When Bible Teachings are ‘Hard Sayings’, we remember that they are the Words of our Lord and His Words give Eternal Life.

Text: John 6:59-69

⁵⁹ These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. ⁶⁰ Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" ⁶¹ When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you?" ⁶² "What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?" ⁶³ "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." ⁶⁴ "But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. ⁶⁵ And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." ⁶⁶ From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. ⁶⁷ Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" ⁶⁸ But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." ⁶⁹ "Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, who is the Bread of Life who nourishes our souls to everlasting life, dear fellow redeemed;

It was about two years into Jesus' three year ministry that He suffered a major defection of those who considered themselves His disciples. Up to this point, Jesus had spent most of His time and energy trying to gather the lost sheep of the house of Israel in the northern region of Galilee. He also sent out His disciples to do mission work among them.

As this critical kingdom work progressed, Jesus' popularity grew in leaps and bounds. There were literally thousands upon thousands of people flocking after Jesus to hear Him preach His powerful messages and watch Him perform mighty wonders. The number of those who regarded themselves disciples of Christ grew immensely. Jesus' popularity reached its height in Galilee when over 5,000 Jews followed Him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee and were miraculously fed by Jesus with just five loaves of bread and two small fish. While there were large numbers who initially viewed themselves as disciples of Christ, a large percentage of them stopped following Him, because they were offended by some of His teachings they said were hard to accept.

When we read of the huge enthusiastic crowds, we might think Jesus and His message of grace was being well received. But this was not at all the case. After the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus withdrew from them when they tried to pressure Him into being their Bread King, that is, a ruler who would put them on an economic and political easy street. In response to those thousands who followed Jesus to Capernaum after the miraculous feeding, Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the sign, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled." (Jn. 6:26) They were more interested in filling their bellies with food than with feeding their souls with Jesus' Word of life and salvation. They were also more interested in Jesus reestablishing the temporal political kingdom of Israel than Jesus establishing the everlasting kingdom of believers.

May God help us from falling prey to the spiritual danger of being so concerned about promoting economic and political agendas that religious and moral principles suffer in the process, such as compromising on the protection of the lives of unborn babies and not upholding the divine institution of marriage between a man and a woman.

Of the many Jews who declared an allegiance to Jesus, the Lord knew from the beginning those who didn't believe in Him and were following Him for the wrong reason. And still, even though Jesus knew this, He showed them loving kindness by preaching a beautiful sermon which could well be entitled "Jesus is the Bread of Life." With this sermon Jesus wanted to turn them into true disciples of Christ.

Using picture language, Jesus depicted Himself as the spiritual Bread of Life. In this sermon, Jesus conveyed the following truths concerning Himself: that He is the eternal Son of God come from heaven; that He assumed human form to offer up Himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our forgiveness; that He is spiritual food for the soul eaten by believing in Him as our Lord and Savior; and that this spiritual food blesses us with spiritual and eternal life.

When many of the so called disciples heard these teachings, they complained about them, saying, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" Because of their biased way of thinking about Jesus and themselves, these teachings of Christ were regarded as being too much for them to swallow. Therefore they weren't willing to accept them.

While they were willing to accept Jesus as being a great prophet, they refused to believe He was the eternal Son of God come from heaven. They said of Him, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He says, 'I have come down from heaven?'" They also found offensive Jesus' teaching that His sacrificial flesh and blood gives eternal life and that in order for them to be united with God and be eternally saved it was necessary for their souls to feed on Him by believing in Him as their Lord and Savior.

These Jews didn't see the need for a Savior, because after all they were the chosen people of God by reason of their descent from the family of Abraham. This would be something like us saying we have a ticket to heaven, because we are children of parents who are Christians.

We find similar responses to God's Word in our day by folks who espouse being Christians. Being governed by their sin-darkened minds, there are those who are offended by the teaching that the Bible is in all its parts the inspired, errant Word of God, and so end up rejecting basic fundamental Christian truths. People are offended by the belief that the Triune God is the only true God, that Jesus is not only true Man, but also true God, and that it is only through Jesus' redemptive work that sinners can be eternally saved. Folks are also offended when they are told they are not children of God and heirs of heaven if they refuse to forsake worldly behavior and immoral lifestyles. Although these people believe themselves to be Christians, yet by rejecting such saving truths of God they have in effect stopped following Christ just like the many in Jesus' day.

The massive defection of disciples spoken of in our text was to be sure a sad day for Jesus, as well as for the true disciples of Christ. It was sad, because those who were offended by the Word of God and stopped following Jesus were thereby cut off from their only hope of eternal salvation.

While there was cause for much sadness, yet at the same time there was reason for much joy, because not all of the disciples forsook Jesus. Jesus turned to the twelve disciples and said to them, "Do you also want to go away?" In response, Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." For the apostles, with the exception of Judas Iscariot, there was really no question in their minds about whether they should join the rest in forsaking Jesus. They had come to know in their minds and believe in their hearts that there was no one else they could turn to find life, hope, and salvation. They declared this with all confidence, because they beheld the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Through eyes of faith they saw Jesus as the eternal Son of God. As such, the apostles knew that whatever Jesus revealed to them was the absolute truths of God and that His Words and teachings bless sinners with eternal life in heaven.

Now, the fact that believers like the apostles attain such a religious conviction concerning Jesus and His teachings while others choose to reject the Lord and His Word this is not in any way an indication that people of faith are of superior mind and heart. Jesus said in His "Bread of Life" sermon, "No one can come Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me." (Vv.44,45) and "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." (V.62) We are not the ones who make the decision to draw near to God. Rather it is God who by His rich grace and mercy chooses to draw us near to Him. It is not by our human reasoning or our personal decision that we come to believe in Jesus. Instead it is the Lord who gives us understanding and gives us faith to believe in Him.

The only power we have is to reject God and His Word. We do not possess the mental capacity or the spiritual will to decide to believe in the Lord. Jesus alludes to this when He says, "the flesh profits nothing." Because the unconverted possess a fleshly mind which does not possess the spiritual strength to draw near to God and decide to believe in Him, the flesh profits nothing. In his explanation to the Third Article, Martin Luther writes in his catechism, "I believe that I cannot by my own reasoning or effort believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified, and kept me in true faith."

It is the Word of Christ that enables us to receive spiritual insight, faith, and life, for through that Word the Holy Spirit gives us understanding and the will to accept the saving Word of God, and instills in us the spirit of love and devotion to God and His ways. As Jesus said, His words are spirit and life, and it is the Spirit who gives life. On another occasion when Peter made the good confession that Jesus is the Son of the living God, Jesus revealed how it was that Peter was able to make this confession, saying, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." (Mt. 16:17)

When Peter and the other apostles confessed their faith in Jesus at this time, they didn't know all that was involved in Jesus carrying out God's plan for our salvation. They know by faith that Jesus possessed the Words of eternal life, but they didn't realize as yet that in order for Jesus to bless us with eternal life He would have to make the ultimate sacrifice of laying down His life for our salvation. As time drew closer for Jesus to finish His redemptive work on the cross of Calvary, He began to reveal to His disciple ever more clearly what He would have to suffer for us. Even though it was hard for the disciples to comprehend this, they were not offended by it. They weren't offended, because they believed Jesus possessed the words of eternal life. And so, they continued to listen to and reflect on the Words of Christ until the Spirit of God opened their eyes to see and their hearts to believe in the good news of the Gospel in all its fullness.

What a blessing it is for us to know by faith how Jesus worked out our salvation and has given us the sure and certain hope of eternal life. Even though we cannot fully comprehend all the teachings of God's Word, we are not offended by them and stop following Jesus because of it. We realize that growth in the knowledge of God's Word is an ongoing process with the help of God. Concerning those teachings which are simply incomprehensible to the human mind, we poke out our eyes of reason and accept them with a childlike faith.

Above all, we rejoice and are comforted in this that we possess all that we need to know for our eternal salvation through Jesus Christ. Praise God for the gift of saving knowledge and faith in the words and teachings of our Savior Jesus Christ, for He has the words of eternal life. Amen.