

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”

⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? ⁶² What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴ 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. ⁶⁵ He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

⁶⁷ “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:60-69)

This is a Hard Teaching

Some subjects are just hard. For instance, math is really not my area of expertise. My wife has a degree in it, but it’s a good thing for me that pastors don’t need that. In fact, for years now, it’s been true that when my kids have questions about their math homework, they’ll come to me and say, “Dad, is mom home?” If she’s not, they just sadly walk away. They don’t even bother to ask me anymore. For many people, math is a hard subject. But it’s not the only one. In truth, there are aspects of theology that are quite difficult. The doctrine of the Trinity and even more, the doctrine of the Incarnation – the Son of God becoming man and how that worked during his life here – these are hard teachings. If you study them in detail and examine all the false teachings and strange ideas that have come out and all the very complicated truths that go with them, well, you might find your eyes crossing. But there’s another kind of hard teaching. Some teachings are simply hard to accept. That’s true in the secular world. Lots of economic theory is hard to accept. When you or I read what some economists have to say, we don’t always buy it – even when they’re right and we’re wrong. Today, we see just how challenging the gospel can be. **This is a hard teaching.**

I.

The words we have before us this morning were the response of Jesus’ disciples to the Bread of Life discourse. Now, “his disciples” here means more than just the Twelve. Here, it means the crowds of people who came out to hear him and who were ready to follow him, even though they didn’t fully understand all that he was teaching yet. But when they heard him, they said, “**This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?**” Why was it hard? In part, it was hard because Jesus *was* giving them advanced theology. The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation were at the heart of all that Jesus said in this chapter. But Jesus didn’t give them a detailed doctrinal brief on those issues. He gave it to them in broad strokes and they did understand his major point: he had come down from heaven. Without all the doctrinal detail that God’s word gives in other places, Jesus did claim that he was the Son of God. It wasn’t hard because they didn’t understand his point. It was hard because they didn’t want to accept it. Further, it was hard because of where Jesus was going with this point. He told them that unless they trusted in him as their Savior, they would not have eternal life. He pointed to his own death as the one way that they could escape from hell. That offended them every bit as much as Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God.

In fact, he asked them, “**Does this offend you?**” The Greek word that Jesus uses here is hard to translate into English. The idea behind the word is tripping you up. Does this teaching about who Christ is and what he came to do trip you up? Jesus was asking them if the cross bothered them. We must understand that the human heart has a huge problem with the gospel. Because we were born sinners, all that God says trips us up. The whole idea of God becoming man is logically very difficult for us to grasp. How do you fit God into a human nature? How does the body of a Jewish baby contain the maker of the universe? How can he be both God and man at the same time? Shouldn’t he be one or the other or something in between?

But it’s worse than that. The whole idea of the Son of God making himself nothing so that he could die and pay for our sin doesn’t make sense to the human heart. People today have a huge problem with why God would do that. To many people, the idea that God would send people to hell is offensive. I’ve had people shout in my face because I dared to suggest that God would send people to hell. Likewise, many people have a real

problem with the idea that God would demand payment in blood for sin. It just seems like a primitive doctrine to them. They feel that today we're too evolved for that kind of view of God. Many people today have a huge problem with the idea of substitution – of Jesus paying what we owe. They reason that if a man committed a terrible crime and his brother volunteered to serve his sentence in jail, not many of us would say that justice had been done. Finally, today, the whole idea that we can know the mind of God, that we can understand what he wants and what he says, that we can believe that we are right and other people are wrong, horrifies people today. It sends them running from our churches.

And it was no different in Jesus' day. It was merely the details of what tripped them up that was different. But in the end, it was the same great doctrines of Scripture. Jesus recognized that fact. The Son of God knew exactly how these people who claimed to follow him were reacting when they heard and understood what Jesus taught. And how did Jesus answer them? He said, **“What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!”** Jesus was really challenging their unbelief. He really stated again that he had descended from heaven and he asked them if seeing would be believing. What would it take to convince them?

Jesus knew exactly what it would take: a miracle of God. Not just a visible miracle. The people there that day had seen a miracle, the feeding of the five thousand. And other people had seen him raise the dead. But those miracles were not going to convince hearts that were hard. They needed another kind of miracle, a miracle of the heart. Jesus said, **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”** Feeding people, healing people, even driving out demons was at best a temporary blessing. No matter how easy God makes our lives here, the flesh counts for nothing. No blessing of this life gets us into heaven. These people needed the power of God to reach into their hearts and create faith. He does that through words. His words are spirit and they give life.

The flesh counts for nothing because the flesh is revolt against God. You and I were born with sinful human hearts. So it's our nature to follow all those people who have endless problems with what Jesus taught. We could never believe on our own. So why do we believe? Jesus said, **“No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”** And how does God “enable” us? Jesus' words are spirit and they are life. God built the Holy Spirit into his word. So when the law of God condemns us for our sin and unbelief, when we tremble because we hear God say that we have not been nearly faithful enough and we have no power within us to come to him, we tremble because the Holy Spirit hits our hearts with the hammer of the law. But then when we find comfort and relief and joy in the message that Jesus is our Savior, that comfort is ours because God built the Holy Spirit into his gospel, his message of forgiveness and life.

That is God's answer to the hardness our hearts. In love, he comes to us in the word and he makes us his. He does that miracle in our hearts and gives us faith. In love, he comes to us in sorrow and in guilt, in fear and in weakness, and he renews that miracle again and again until he brings us home to heaven. We absolutely need him to do that because none of us would trust in him on our own. That truth is the reason for the reaction of the people of Jesus' day and for the reaction of so many people today. **This is a hard teaching. It is impossible without God's grace.**

II.

You see just how hard the human heart is in one little statement that John makes. He says, **“From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”** Five thousand men, plus women and children had gathered to hear him preach. Yet, when they heard who he really was and what he had really come to do, they abandoned him in droves. People who study the life of Christ call this the beginning of the year of opposition. We tend to think of Jesus as always having success. So many times, he slammed his enemies. Everywhere he went, the crowds overflowed because they wanted to see him. That would continue to be true. But from this moment forward, their attitude was different. They still wanted to see a miracle. Some of them were even hoping he was the Savior. But more and more they were becoming the crowd that shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” on the first Good Friday.

We see the same thing going on today. So many churches simply cannot bring themselves to proclaim the doctrine of Christ as God and Savior. They cannot stand to uphold the teachings of Scripture when our society disagrees with them. They want to be known as followers of Christ but they don't really want to hear what he himself says. They want to recreate Christ in their own image.

When the disciples of his day turned away, Jesus asked the Twelve a test question, **“You do not want to leave too, do you?”** Peter answered, **“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.” Once before, Jesus had asked the disciples who they believed he was. Peter made what is known as his great confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Well, just be fair, I think we should call this his second great confession. When Jesus had just finished the hardest sermon of his career and the crowds were turning against him, Peter confessed that Jesus had the words of eternal life. Christ had God’s only cure for hardness of heart and sin. Peter confessed that Jesus was the Holy One of God – the Son of God and the Savior.

Now, in the verses that follow our text, Jesus points out that even one of the Twelve, Judas, was an unbeliever. So, Peter’s confession is surrounded by false confessions, by Christians turning away or only pretending to believe. Even today, in the midst of a church torn by unbelief and unfaithfulness, those who believe still recognize the one imperative truth of the Christian Church: Jesus, the Holy One of God, has the words that give eternal life. That is where the power is. That is where eternal life comes from. That is where we will find comfort when the devil attacks and strength to stand up against all those temptations that want to lead us away from Jesus.

As long as this sinful world continues, our faith will be challenged. The devil does not want us to reach heaven. So he never gives our faith a moment’s peace. The sinner in our own heart is determined to find a way to destroy our faith. And he knows that one of his most effective weapons is to confuse us about what it means to follow Jesus and then to take offense when our pastor dares to tell us what the Bible really says. The society we live in has endless ways of leading us into a Christianity that looks good and loving but that rejects the Savior. The danger is real. So Jesus asks us the same test question that he asked the Twelve: “You don’t want to leave, do you?” And he’s looking for the same answer, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” No matter how harsh the opposition is, the gospel gives us faith and keeps that faith alive until we stand with Christ in heaven. That’s the whole point of the contrast here between those who only pretend to believe and those who really do believe. **This is a hard teaching, but it’s powerful to make us his.**

Do you ever fear that you will lose your faith? Do you worry about the faith of those you love? I’ve known many parents who have wrestled with the apparent lack of interest of their children. I used to know an elderly woman whose husband had been a pastor, but he was living in a nursing home, lost in a fog of dementia, unable to speak to her or recognize her. And she was afraid that in that state, her husband who had taught and preached the good news would be fooled by the devil. I’ve known Christians who wrestled with temptation and doubt and despair. And in all those situations, God has one solution for us: his power built into the good news that Jesus is our Savior. He died. He rose. He won the victory. He has made us his and he will bring us home. My friends, let nothing keep you from this power. Yes, the gospel is a hard teaching. It means that all those who refuse it are going to hell. That is perhaps the most offensive thing you can say in America in 2012. But that gospel has the power to make us his. Amen.