

John 6:60-71 - Group Discussion Guide

TEXT - John 6:59–71 (ESV) 59 Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. 60 When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” 61 But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, “Do you take offense at this? 62 Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) 65 And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” 66 After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. 67 So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” 68 Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, 69 and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.” 70 Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.” 71 He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.

What is going on in this text (retell the story or summarize main points)?

THEOLOGY - What do we learn about God from this text?

- a) God is (being) and does (doing) as Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit is the 3rd person of the Trinity who enables hearts deadened by sin to awaken to God’s grace (v63). The Holy Spirit helps open our minds to understand who Jesus is and trust all that he has done for us. It is only through the empowering of the Holy Spirit that we can understand the spiritual life Jesus is talking about in John 6.
- b) Life is found in God alone. God created us for physical life (bios) and spiritual life (zoe). Because of sin, we now experience physical and spiritual death. Jesus comes to bring us from death to life. Jesus does not claim to be one way to life, but the only way to new life.

Anything else we might learn about God from the text?

LIFE

What is your response to Jesus' exclusive claim as the only way to salvation and life? Where else would you turn?

Why is it important that we receive Jesus both as Savior and Lord?

How does this text lead you to love God and others more?

How do you sense the Spirit leading you to respond in obedience? How does what you learned lead you to change?

PRAYER

Confess your sin to God in prayer and ask Him for strength to respond to his word.

What is one personal need you have that we can pray for you as a group?

Pray for one friend, family member, or coworker who you want to share the love of Jesus with.

Consulting the Scholars¹ - 6:60. Not only ‘the Jews’ (v. 52) but many of his disciples were finding Jesus’ teaching hard to take. The dividing line, for John, is never race (cf. notes on 1:19) but response to Jesus. ‘Disciples’ must be distinguished from ‘the Twelve’ (cf. vv. 66, 67). More importantly, just as there is faith and faith (2:23–25), so are there disciples and disciples. At the most elementary level, a disciple is someone who is at that point following Jesus, either literally by joining the group that pursued him from place to place, or metaphorically in regarding him as the authoritative teacher. Such a ‘disciple’ is not necessarily a ‘Christian’, someone who has savingly trusted Jesus and sworn allegiance to him, given by the Father to the Son, drawn by the Father and born again by the Spirit. Jesus will make it clear in due course that only those who continue in his word are truly his ‘disciples’ (8:31). The ‘disciples’ described here do not remain in his word; they find it to be hard teaching (lit. ‘word’, *logos*; cf. notes on 1:1) and wonder who can accept it. The adjective rendered ‘hard’ in the niv (*sklēros*) does not mean ‘hard to understand’ but ‘harsh’, ‘offensive’. These ‘disciples’ will not long remain disciples, because they find Jesus’ word intolerable.

What was it that offended their sensibilities? Judging by the preceding discourse, there were four features in Jesus’ word at which they took umbrage. (1) They were more interested in food (v. 26), political messianism (vv. 14–15) and manipulative miracles (vv. 30–31) than in the spiritual realities to which the feeding miracle had pointed. (2) They were unprepared to relinquish their own sovereign authority even in matters religious, and therefore were incapable of taking the first steps of genuine faith (vv. 41–46). (3) In particular they were offended at the claims Jesus advanced, claiming to be greater than Moses, uniquely sent by God and authorized to give life (vv. 32ff., 58). (4) The extended metaphor of the ‘bread’ is itself offensive to them, especially when it assaults clear taboos and becomes a matter of ‘eating flesh’ and ‘drinking blood’.

6:62. Jesus had earlier spoken of his coming down from heaven (v. 38). Now he asks what their reaction will be if they see him ascend to where he was before. The Greek preserves the condition but no conclusion, so it is possible to understand the argument in one of two ways: (1) Jesus’ ascension will make the offence even greater; or (2) Jesus’ ascension will reduce or remove the offence. When we remember what Jesus’ ‘ascending’ and his ‘lifting up’ (cf. notes on 3:14) mean in the Fourth Gospel, we may conclude that the alternatives are not mutually exclusive (cf. Westcott, 1. 247). If the disciples find Jesus’ claims, authority and even his language offensive, what will they think when they see Jesus on the cross, his way of ‘ascending’ to the place where he was before? That is the supreme scandal. However offensive the linguistic expression ‘eating flesh and drinking blood’ may be, how much more offensive is the crucifixion of an alleged Messiah! The very idea is outrageous, bordering on blasphemous obscenity, ‘a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles’ (1 Cor. 1:23). Yet this stands at the very heart of the divine self-disclosure. The moment of Jesus’ greatest degradation and shame is the moment of his glorification, the path of his return to the glory he had with the Father before the world began (17:5). The hour when the Servant of the Lord is despised and rejected by men, when he is pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (Is. 53:3–5) is the very portal to the time when ‘he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted’ (Is. 52:13).

That is why the condition of this verse is left open. How men and women respond to this supreme scandal determines their destiny. Other religious leaders were said to have ascended to heaven at the end of their life, but Jesus the Son of Man (the title especially connected with his function as the revealer from heaven) first descended (v. 38; cf. notes on 1:51; 6:27, 53), and so in ascending is merely returning to where he was before (cf. 17:5). This not only affirms Jesus’ pre-existence, but places him in a class quite different from antecedent Jewish religious heroes.

6:63. To take the words of the preceding discourse literally, without penetrating their symbolic meaning, is useless. It causes offence; it does not arrive at Jesus’ meaning, for the flesh counts for nothing. Although this clause does not rule out all allusion in the preceding verses to the Lord’s supper, it is impossible not to see in ‘flesh’ a direct

¹ Carson, D. A. (1991). *The Gospel according to John* (pp. 300–304). Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans.

reference to the preceding discussion, and therefore a dismissal of all primarily sacramental interpretations. It is not as if the flesh is of no significance: after all, the Word became flesh (1:14). But when all the focus of attention is on the flesh, then the real significance of Jesus is missed, and the kinds of objections raised both by ‘the Jews’ and by ostensible disciples quickly surface.

But if flesh does not give life, what does? One of the clearest characteristics of the Spirit in the Old Testament is the giving of life (e.g. Gn. 1:2; Ezk. 37:1ff.; cf. Barrett, HSGT, pp. 18–23). In this Gospel we have already been introduced to the Spirit’s role in the new birth (Jn. 3); there the contrast between flesh and spirit is no less sharp. So here: The Spirit gives life. Strictly speaking, the Spirit does not come upon the disciples until after Jesus’ ascension (7:37–39); but already Jesus himself is the bearer of the Spirit (1:32f.), the one to whom God gives the Spirit without limit and who therefore speaks the words of God (3:34). That is why Jesus can now say, The words I have spoken to you are spirit (i.e. they are the product of the life-giving Spirit) and they are life (i.e. Jesus’ words, rightly understood and absorbed, generate life—cf. 5:24). If the words of Jesus in this discourse are rightly grasped, then instead of rejecting Jesus people will see him as the bread from heaven, the one who gives his flesh for the life of the world, the one who alone provides eternal life, and they will receive him and believe in him, taste eternal life even now, and enjoy the promise that he will raise them up on the last day.

It is hard not to see in the last clause an allusion to Jeremiah 15:16, where the prophet addresses God: ‘When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight’ (cf. also Ezk. 2:8–3:3; Rev. 10:9ff.). In short, Jeremiah’s assessment of God’s words is the same as Jesus’ assessment of his own words. One cannot feed on Christ without feeding on Christ’s words, for truly believing Jesus cannot be separated from truly believing Jesus’ words (5:46–47). Human beings live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Dt. 8:3). The identical claim is now made for the words of Jesus, precisely because he is the Word incarnate (1:1–18; cf. 5:19–30). The connection between v. 63 and vv. 61–62 is now clear. Already Jesus is establishing the link between his own ascension/glorification (v. 62) and the coming of the Spirit (v. 63; cf. 7:37–39). Moreover, all the points that had offended these shallow disciples find their answer here—a critically divisive answer. Here is sharp insistence on the priority of spiritual life, unrelenting stress on Jesus’ authority and superiority over Moses, and above all the promise of eternal life engendered by the Spirit and the Word, consequent upon Jesus ‘ascending’ by a means more offensive than the harshest metaphor.

6:64. However great the revelation and the promises, some do not believe. If they do not combine the message with faith, it is of no value to them (Heb. 4:2). The pattern of unbelief came as no surprise to Jesus. He knew from the beginning (John means either ‘from the beginning’ of Jesus’ ministry or possibly, as in 1:1, ‘from the beginning’ absolutely) not only who did not believe (cf. notes on v. 61) but also the supreme example of unbelief, the betrayer himself. The final words of the verse anticipate vv. 70–71. The rather rare future participial construction (ho paradōsōn auton, ‘who would betray him’) depicts the speaker’s firm expectation (cf. Rob, p. 1118; Porter, p. 418). Jesus was going toward his God-appointed task with his eyes wide open.

6:65. ‘This’ in This is why refers to the phenomenon of unbelief—i.e. Jesus knew in advance that he would be rejected by many, and, knowing this, he earlier explained (vv. 37, 44) the need for the divine initiative which draws those whom the Father has given to the Son and enables them to believe. This advance explanation prepares the true believers themselves to face the attacks of unbelievers, without finding their own faith threatened (cf. 13:18–19). However much men and women are commanded to believe, and are held accountable for their unbelief, genuine coming to faith is never finally a matter of autonomous human decision. The remaining verses in the chapter show this is true even of the Twelve.

6:66. From this time (or ‘For this reason’: ek toutou could mean either) many of his disciples (cf. notes on v. 60) abandoned him decisively. Doubtless these many ... disciples are those who found his earlier discourse intolerable (v. 60). Jesus’ additional remarks have done nothing to remove the offence they have found in his words; he did not

expect it to be otherwise, and would not shape his comments to pander to their taste. ‘What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive’ (Bruce, p. 164). These Galileans thus joined the earlier Jerusalem followers who failed to pass the test of unqualified allegiance and perseverance grounded in grace-prompted faith.

6:67. Jesus’ question to the Twelve (here introduced as such for the first time; cf. Carson, *Matt*, pp. 236–240) opens with the interrogative *mē*. In non-rhetorical questions, this particle either demands the answer No or else puts the question in a hesitating, tentative fashion (*M.* 1. 193). Granted the certainty of Jesus’ knowledge regarding those who are his, it is unlikely the latter applies here. The question is not moody, glum, but a challenging ‘Surely you don’t want to go away too, do you?’ The question is asked more for their sake than his. They need to articulate a response more than he needs to hear it. One might guess from the flow of the narrative that the defection has been so substantial on this occasion that not many more than the Twelve actually remain.

6:68–69. As usual, Simon Peter (cf. notes on 1:40, 42) speaks his mind. His response has certain similarities to the confession at Caesarea Philippi (*Mk.* 8:29 par.), though it is not at all clear that the two passages refer to the same incident. Here, Peter’s response is in two differentiable parts. (1) He asks, Lord, to whom [else] shall we go? What alternatives are there, granted that You have the words of eternal life? Peter may not have understood all that much of the preceding discourse, but he here picks up on v. 63: the words Jesus has spoken ‘are spirit and they are life’. (2) We believe and know [the Gk. perfects are properly stative, i.e. expressing the state of the disciples’ faith and knowledge: cf. Porter, pp. 251ff.] that you are the Holy One of God. The additional words found in the *av* (‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’) are not original, but are due to assimilation to Matthew 16:16. The verbs ‘to believe’ and ‘to know’ are extremely common in John, and are frequently roughly synonymous (cf. the parallelism in 17:8). There is one absolute distinction: Jesus himself is said to know God (7:29; 8:55; 10:15; 17:25), but never to believe in him. To believe apparently has overtones of dependence appropriate to creatures, redeemed creatures, but not to the one who is both the agent of creation (1:3) and their redeemer. Knowledge in the Fourth Gospel is frequently personal (it is knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ that constitutes eternal life, 17:3), but no less frequently propositional (as here: the disciples know that Jesus is such and such).

The full title the Holy One of God occurs elsewhere in Mark 1:24 (= Luke 4:34) in the mouth of a demon. Probably it is a messianic title, though clear evidence of such usage is lacking. At the same time, the adjective ‘holy’ groups Jesus with his ‘Holy Father’ (17:11). Jesus is the one whom the Father has ‘set apart [lit. “sanctified”, same root as “holy”] as his very own’ (10:36). Indeed, Jesus sanctifies himself (17:19). He could not but be the Holy One if he was to deal effectively with ‘the sin of the world’ (1:29). Doubtless Peter and the other members of the Twelve entertained at that time a significantly muddier conception of what the expression meant than they did after Jesus’ resurrection and exaltation. It was enough that their first messianic hopes (1:41, 45) were being confirmed, that they saw in Jesus one who was greater than a prophet, greater than Moses, none less than ‘the Holy One of God’.

6:70. Nevertheless, Peter’s way of expressing himself appears somewhat pretentious, as if he and his fellows are a cut above the fickle ‘disciples’ who have turned away, superior at least in insight. Indeed, Peter’s words might almost be taken to mean that he is doing Jesus a favour. But Jesus will not allow even a whisper of human pretensions. Ultimately, the Twelve did not choose Jesus; he chose them (though alone amongst the Evangelists, John does not record their actual appointment). Even there, the one catastrophic failure amongst the Twelve was not unforeseen. One of them was a *diabolos*: the word in common Greek means ‘slanderer’ or ‘false accuser’, but in the New Testament it always refers, when it is a substantive, to Satan, the prince of darkness (e.g. 8:44; 13:2; cf. 13:27). Indeed the Greek should probably not be rendered one of you is a devil but ‘one of you is the devil’. The meaning is clear from 13:2, clearer yet from Mark 8:33 par., where Jesus addresses Peter as ‘Satan’. The supreme adversary (Heb. *šāṭān*) of God so operates behind failing human beings that his malice becomes theirs. Jesus can discern the source, and labels it appropriately.