

Words Of Spirit And Life – John 6:51-71

John 6:51-71. We're studying the book of John that we might believe and keep believing. Believe and live. And while this particular passage has been a source of disagreement from the time it was spoken, understood rightly it's food for the soul and truth for life. Words of spirit and life.

So let's get at it. V51. Jesus is speaking, and says – *I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*"

When the crowd said in v34, *give us this bread always*, referring to the bread of heaven, the implication was that they wanted to *eat* it; just like their forefathers ate manna. But previous to v50, Jesus didn't *use* that word when referring to himself. And he didn't use the word *flesh*.

But here, he gets graphic. For two reasons I think: (A) To drive home the point; and (B) To separate true believers from casual ones; believers in name only. I think that's why he gets so uncomfortably explicit.

And the point he's driving home is this:

To receive all that Jesus offers, you have to savor him in your soul (v51-58)

That's the idea of "eats." *If anyone eats this bread*, v51. But the crowd didn't get it. V52 – *The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"* They had the right words but the wrong idea. Another example of people missing the point. Which led to an argument; a dispute. Just like it does today.

[53] So Jesus said to them [driving the point home even further now], "Truly, truly, I say to you [emphasis], unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man [referring to himself] and drink his blood [even more graphic], you have no life in you. Eternal life or otherwise. You don't get it and you don't have it. You have to eat and drink of Jesus.

Then he says it again in the positive. *[54] Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* Eat and drink of Jesus, and eternal life is yours. Resurrection is yours.

[55] For my flesh [he says] is true food, and my blood is true drink. The *real* stuff for life and sustenance. *Soul*-satisfying food. Eternal drink. Implying that everything else is lacking. From false religions to the false promises of worldly pleasures. Cheap substitutes that taste great, but don't last. What are you tasting in life? What are you savoring? Make it Jesus and eternal life is yours. Including your resurrection.

Then he adds another benefit to his offer. V56 – *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.* Eat and drink of Jesus, and you will be as close to him as humanly possible. United with him in your spirit, in an on-going relationship. You in him and he in you; life in life; Spirit to spirit. An *abiding* relationship.

Then he explains how it all works. V57 – *As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.* It's the great pass-through. The life he offers comes straight from God. So that the same life that sustains Jesus, sustains us. *From* the Father, through the Son.

Then he summarizes everything in v58 – *This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.*" [Then John adds,] *[59] Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.*

In the synagogue! To Jews! Talk about pressing the point; separating true believers from casual ones. His repeated references to eating flesh and drinking blood would have been even *more* offensive to them if they didn't get it. Because the Mosaic Law expressly *forbids* such things (Lev 17:10-14). And the reason it gives, the reason God forbids it, is that the *life* of a person is in their blood. Which is the very reason Jesus urged them to eat and drink *his*. Don't miss the intended irony.

The question is, what does he mean? I think it's this. To *feed* on Jesus, is to *believe* on Jesus. To eat and drink of him, is to receive him into your soul like food into your body. Take him into your life and draw on his strength. Unite with him in spirit and savor his presence.

It's a metaphor for belief. And a requirement to receive all that he offers – eternal life, resurrection, and an abiding relationship. You have to savor him in your soul.

But many of them took it literally. Separating the true believers from false ones; casual ones. And they weren't the only ones.

Unfortunately, some religions take this literally

This is the primary passage that Roman Catholicism points to, to justify their belief that the bread and wine of their mass, their worship service, actually turns into the body and blood of Jesus.

So when Jesus said at The Last Supper, "*This is my body*" (Mt 26:26), they think he meant it literally. And therefore when a priest "consecrates" the elements, they transform into the actual flesh and actual blood of Jesus. Because Jesus said in v53 – *Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.* The bread and cup *has* to be his literal, they say, otherwise you're not saved!

Lutherans on the other hand, believe that when the elements are properly blessed, the body and blood of Jesus are *with* the bread and wine. Invisible, but there. And they too would point to this passage.

Except that's contrary to what Jesus says in the very next paragraph. V60 – *When many of his disciples heard it [heard his comments about eating and drinking], they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"* Because they took it literally. Thinking that it's some form of cannibalism.

[61] But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this [not his twelve disciples, but his followers in general as we'll see], 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?" "Would you believe me then? Would you accept my words then? If I ascended *back* to heaven? The place from which I say I came?" That's *one* of the points he's making.

The other, is that his ascension would make it *impossible* for them to literally eat his flesh and drink his blood. “What if I ascended back to heaven and wasn’t even here? Would *that* help you understand that this isn’t literal? Would that ease the offense?”

Then he says in v63 – *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all* (63a). Referring not to his physical *death*, to say it was of no help in securing our life, but his physical *flesh*. Even if you *could* eat it, it wouldn’t make any difference, he says. It’s of *no help at all*. It’s his *Spirit* who gives life. The Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, some religions ignore that or try to explain it away.

But Jesus clearly spoke symbolically (v60-63)

Some religions take this literally, but Jesus spoke *symbolically* about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

I say that for . . .

• Three Reasons:

First, he explicitly *said his words were spiritual*. V63b – *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*. He couldn’t be clearer. And it’s the key to the entire passage. *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit*, he said. As in, spiritual. The exact *opposite* of literal. The *opposite* of physical.

Jesus was simply using the physical acts of eating and drinking, to convey *spiritual* realities about believing and receiving. Like he did with Nicodemus in chapter 3. “*You must be born again*.” (John 3:7) A physical act to convey a spiritual reality. Same here.

Second, Jesus spoke *symbolically* about eating and drinking, because **the apostles never did it**. The *Apostles* never actually ate his flesh and drank his blood. Not even a hint of it. That’s gross. Which, if it’s literal, means that not even the Apostles have life. Which is contrary to all they said and did as Apostles.

Nor did they literally eat and drink of his body and blood at The Last Supper; *before* he died. When Jesus said with *bread in hand*, “This is my body,” it would have been obvious to them that he was speaking figuratively. Symbolically. Because his *actual* body was *holding* the bread.

It would be similar to me holding up a group photo on my phone, pointing to my face, and saying, “This is me.” Do I mean that literally? Of course not. And neither did Jesus. It’s a figure of speech to say, “This *represents* me. Symbolizes me.”

And third, **the similarities between v40 and v54** indicate that he spoke symbolically. The parallels between those two verses. In v40 Jesus says – “*Everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*.” And in v54 he says – *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*. Same result, described two different ways. Which led St. Augustine in the 4th century, to say it as clearly as any. “Believe and you have eaten.”

Three reasons that Jesus clearly spoke symbolically. Fail to see that and you’ll come to all kinds of false conclusions. Maybe even miss out on what he offers.

Which brings us to the *fourth* part of all this. Jesus clearly spoke symbolically . . .

And his words are meant to convey life (v63)

V63 again. *The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*. In other words, they promise life, point to life, and give us life. They’re *life*-giving words. Something he emphasizes over and over again.

V51 – *If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever*. Words that convey life. And v53 the same – “*Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*.” And v54 – *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life*. And v57 – *Whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me*. And v58 – *Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever*. And v63 – *It is the Spirit who gives life*.

Words of life, meant to convey life. Promise life. Give us life. Assure us of life. And don’t forget the *definition* of life: the ability to enjoy God and his work for all eternity; the gift and inclination to worship him and follow him. It’s not just consciousness and breathing, but glory and blessing. His words convey *that*.

So whatever you do, don’t fail to believe (v64-71)

If Jesus spoke words of life, don’t fail to believe them in order to *get* life.

V63b again. “*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. [64] But there are some of you who do not believe*.” [They weren’t picking up what he laid down. They weren’t buying it.] (*For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him* [referring to Judas].) He wasn’t guessing. He knew names, he knew faces, and he knew hearts. And still does. He knows if *you* don’t really believe, just like he knew Judas didn’t really believe.

[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.”* He’s referring back to v44, where he said – *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*. Unless it’s granted by the Father.

I think he’s saying two things here. First, the reason some people don’t believe, is that it hasn’t been granted by God. He’s not drawing them. At least not yet. *There are some of you who do not believe*, v64, because no one *can* believe, v65, *unless it is granted him by the Father*. God’s sovereignty is absolutely necessary.

And second, the second thing he’s saying, is that some people don’t believe because it’s *hard* to believe. Going back to v60 – *When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?”* Who can believe it? It’s hard to understand and hard to accept. Which is why it’s necessary for God to *grant* it, v65; draw us to believe. Draw us to Jesus.

Two thoughts that explain a lot. People don’t believe because they *can’t*, and people don’t believe because they *won’t*. Both and. Two sides of the same coin.

And the result is found in v66 – *After this many of his disciples [his followers] turned back and no longer walked with him*. Showing like we found last week, that they didn’t really believe in the first place. Because Jesus said in v39 – *This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me*. All those who God has appointed unto salvation (Acts 13:48), Jesus will never lose. Never *let* them go.

But you have to believe . . .

- **And keep believing**

Keep trusting. *Keep* walking with him. Because if you don't, you don't have life in the first place. *Whoever believes has eternal life* (47) Believed at first and believes now; present tense.

Which means you have to *persevere* in your faith. Believe and *keep* believing. **(Heb 3:14)** *For we have come to share in Christ* [Hebrews says], *if indeed we hold our original confidence* [our original belief] *firm to the end*. In other words, we were saved at the beginning, if we persevere to the end. If we don't persevere, we show we *didn't* share in Christ at the beginning. And don't now.

So whatever you do, don't fail to believe and keep believing. In the strength that God provides, hold on and keep on. Be like Peter and the twelve in the next verses.

Many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. [67] So Jesus [v67] *said to the twelve* [his closest disciples], *“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.”* How *could* we leave? Who else is there? *To whom shall we go?*

Same for now. Who else even compares to Jesus? Who *else* rose from the dead? Who else made claims of divinity, backed up with miracles? Who else *has* life and *offers* life? *Is* life and raises life?

And who else is God in the flesh? *The Holy One of God* as Peter said it. The one set apart *by* God, *from* God.

If you believe and know him as such, keep on. *Keep* believing. If you haven't, get started. And if you're thinking about quitting, renouncing your faith and walking away, think again. **Because there's no one else** to turn to, and *no-where* else to go.

All of which is illustrated by the example of Judas. V70 – *Jesus answered them, “Did I not choose you, the twelve?* [Of course he did.] *And yet one of you is a devil.”* [One of you doesn't *really* believe. One of you is evil and rebellious.] [71] *He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him.*

One of the twelve! One of the people *closest* to Jesus; hand-*picked* by Jesus. One of the men he chose to teach, personally. Eat, sleep, and breathe with continually. Someone with a front row seat to all he did.

And yet he walked away. Committing the ultimate betrayal, and then suicide. Nowhere else to go, and no one else to turn to.

Summary

I think it's a warning to say make sure *you* believe, and keep believing. And make sure you mean it; not just with your words but your life. Instead of depending on your circumstances to carry you along, like Judas; or riding the coattails of your family, or church, or friends; depend on Jesus. Believe in Jesus. *Savor* Jesus.

Prayer – Lord Jesus, we do. We do believe. And consider it the most precious privilege of our lives. To savor you, abide in you, live with you, and worship you. You in us, the hope of glory. So to you we cling. To you we hold. Our life, our hope, and our joy; forever.

You Are Loved