

# The Stuff Jesus Said: I'm the Bread of Life

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*The Stuff Jesus Said:* When I was in first grade, we had these little, soft strips of material with eyes and a little, smiling mouth glued on to them. They were called “warm fuzzies” and every student was given one at the very beginning of the year. If you were good then you got to keep it, but if you were bad, you had it taken away as a punishment. (I had mine taken away a lot.) The warm fuzzies were nice and cute and happy and fun to have around. There was nothing to fear from your warm fuzzy. It was always your friend—always on your side.

Sometimes, I'm afraid, this is what people tend to do these days with Jesus. They imagine him to be a warm and fuzzy kind of rabbi. The kind of religious leader who's always fun to have around—who's always our friend and always on our side. But, Jesus was often (*even usually!*) anything but warm and fuzzy.

He said things that were downright inappropriate. He said things that were—to those whom he met—really, really offensive. He often made parties very awkward for everyone there. Sometimes, in fact, he said stuff that was horrific and grotesque and shouldn't be mentioned in polite company. (We're going to look at one of those in today's text.) Simply put, Jesus was uncomfortably provocative.

This summer we're going to look at the stuff Jesus said. We're going to hear from the real Jesus, not the warm and fuzzy, imaginary Jesus. For the next 15 weeks, we'll be considering his claims in order that we might really get to know this teacher who changed the world—really get to know him thru his own words.

Let's begin this morning with his original hard saying.

## *I'm the Bread of Life*

### **John 6:53-59**

<sup>53</sup> Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. <sup>54</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. <sup>55</sup> For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. <sup>56</sup> Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me and I live

because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.<sup>58</sup> This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your ancestors ate manna and died, but whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.”<sup>59</sup> He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Here Jesus is in a synagogue. We find this out at the very end of the passage. And, he is teaching there, but not in a typical way because his whole sermon revolves around him—centers on himself. He says all kinds of incredible things about himself leading up to what we just read. Things no normal person should say.

- Jesus says he was sent from heaven by God to do God’s will (v. 38).
- He says he has the power to raise people from the dead (vv. 39, 40, 44).
- He says he is the only one who has seen God (v. 46).
- He says that he himself is a greater miracle than God’s provision of manna from heaven during Israel’s wilderness wanderings (vv. 48-49).

As Jesus says these kinds of things, the tension is building in the synagogue. They begin to grumble and get upset with him. The entire sermon is a kind of debate between Jesus and the crowd.<sup>1</sup> Back and forth, back and forth, they go. It’s obvious, as we read, that Jesus isn’t winning friends as he preaches. His synagogue etiquette seems wanting. Doesn’t he know this isn’t how you’re supposed to teach the Torah? Jesus is a total theological disaster—the people begin to complain.

Imagine something similar in our context. Imagine I invite someone to preach on a Sunday morning. Imagine he comes in and reads a text from the Old Testament. For argument’s sake, suppose it’s the same text Jesus refers to here in the synagogue at Capernaum (i.e. Exodus 16, Israel during its wilderness wanderings getting bread from God to feed upon). The text is read and the preacher begins to preach a sermon in the third person about himself.

- He says he’s not come from another local church or another organization. Rather, he’s come from heaven. He’s come from God.

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<sup>1</sup> As Craig S. Keener notes, this sermon in the synagogue at Capernaum is in the form of “a rabbinic debate.” See Keener, *The Gospel of John* (vol. 1), 679.

- He says he holds the power over Covid-19 and, even more, all death itself.
- He says this passage ultimately points to him—his coming and his career. That ultimately the bread from heaven was a sign speaking of him.

Now, I know you're a gentle, compassionate, and openminded group of folks, but I don't think many of you would put up with that. In fact, I hope, as your pastor, that you wouldn't put up with this type of preaching. I hope you'd be upset by this. I know I'd be a lot like the people Jesus debates with here. We shouldn't be too harsh in our judgments of them. The things Jesus was saying were difficult things to hear. He was blowing-up treasured religious conventions and beliefs. These were things which only God had the right to say and the power to do.

Jesus was making boasts he would need to back up. Even the people say this. They want a sign (v. 30). They say that Moses gave them bread from heaven (v. 31). So, where's your proof Jesus?

Friends, here's the irony in this whole exchange. Jesus just fed five thousand. He has just multiplied a few loaves of bread and fish and miraculously fed multitudes of people. He has just performed a sign. And, many of those who are debating him in the synagogue now had witnessed that miracle—had literally fed off of his power. He had already given them proof. How much do they need?

You see, all the bold statements Jesus makes here are proffered in the context of his miraculous ministry. He doesn't simply appear in the synagogue one Saturday making all kinds of audacious claims about himself—like the preacher I mentioned in my illustration. No. Jesus came as a man “accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs” (Acts 2:22). Jesus came with God's stamp of approval on him. And, those miracles are the stepladder by which we are able to climb to the summit of his true identity—by which we begin to evaluate the types of bold claims he makes about himself right here as well as in other places in Scripture.

Friends, the types of bold claims Jesus makes about himself really shame me. He was fearless in revealing his identity to those he knew would typically reject him and eventually even kill him. He knew that this revelation was the Father's mission for him; it's why he had come. So, despite the opposition, he courageously revealed

who he was and why he came. Yet, I regularly shy away from making the most basic of statements about him for fear of ridicule.

I wonder if you can relate. Have you ever felt that?

Here's the thing. It's not even about me. It's about him. It's about his claims. Why can't I be bold in directing attention toward him? That's our calling.

Just this week, I saw a social media post from a friend where he simply asked, "God or Mammon?" Now, I know this friend isn't a believer. And, I know the types of folks frequenting his posts can often times be antagonistic towards those who are. In fact, I have watched posts like this one degenerate into long diatribes against faith in God and, especially, in Jesus. However, it was a simple question—an offering from a non-Christian that might evolve into a meaningful conversation and witness. Nevertheless, I wrestled back and forth. Should I answer or not? Should I speak-up or not? What if someone attacks me?

But, why was I concerned whether or not someone would attack *me*? It wasn't about *me*. It isn't about *us*. Not really. It's always about Jesus.

If we can simply take any pushback, which comes our way, and direct people to Jesus—direct their attention to what he claimed about himself—then we've done what we've been called to do. We have succeeded. Our simple task is to point people to the Christ. Just as with John the Baptist, Jesus "must become greater" while we "must become less" (John 3:30).

And, we don't need to answer questions that our friends aren't asking either. My friend asked, "God or Mammon?" He didn't ask me to comment on the benefits of finding my identity in God rather than money. He didn't ask me for theistic proofs. He didn't ask me to share the gospel with him. He asked one very precise question; simply—Would I rather have God or money?

Friends, if you believe that God is sovereign, then trust him with your friends. Trust that he's sovereign over the questions they ask. And honor him and honor them by answering those questions—not the ones you think they should be asking.

Well, I did post my response. I wrote—"I choose God, specifically Jesus." That was all. That was all God asked me to say. We'll see where it goes in the future. Maybe nowhere. Yet, even if it never comes to anything more—at least I was faithful

in the moment, at least I pointed to Jesus. That's ultimately what we're called to do. Not have all the answers. Not be the smartest people around. We are simply called to introduce people to Jesus. Amen?

Well, this has all been a mere introduction to the really horrific and grotesque and inappropriate thing Jesus says in that synagogue. The really hard saying comes at the beginning of today's text, where Jesus says:

*Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you (v. 53).*

Now, it's easy for us to domesticate this saying from Jesus—to make it tame. It's not tame, friends. This is as provocative as it gets. In fact, just after saying this, many of his disciples are gone. Let me repeat that. I didn't say many in the crowd. I'm sure they were gone. I said many of his disciples, his followers. They walk away. They mumble to themselves: "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?" (v. 60). That's why I called this his original hard saying.<sup>2</sup>

But, why is it so hard for them? What makes it so difficult?

Well, there are multiple reasons. **First of all**, Jesus uses imagery in this text which was holistically condemned in the ancient Mediterranean world—as it is also in the modern world. Cannibalism isn't usually a topic for polite conversation today, and it was even less so back then.

**Next**, Jesus is talking about things, in his Jewish religious context, which were among the most reprehensible and taboo sins. The Lord had strictly forbidden eating or drinking any blood (Leviticus 17:10-14). Jesus, however, wasn't simply talking about any blood. He wasn't merely telling this Hebrew crowd to eat a blood sausage or some black pudding. He's telling them they have to drink his blood. This imagery was truly religiously offensive to them.

**Finally**, Jesus is saying these things in a synagogue. He's saying these things during a worship service. If it was bad form to discuss such things while standing around the water cooler then it was even worse form to bring them up while teaching in church. The crowds are disgusted and upset. They, consequently, give up arguing

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<sup>2</sup> F. F. Bruce also refers to it as "the original hard saying" in his discussion of this verse. See Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*, 21.

with him and simply begin to walk away—even those who’d been his followers just before the worship service began.

My best friend Shannon has the hilarious misfortune of being misunderstood at the worst possible times. He’s that person who will say something that’s awkward and, then, will attempt to say something else to correct his mistake, but that thing will simply make things more awkward. You know, he just keeps digging himself in deeper and deeper until he gives up in frustration. That’s my best friend.

But, let me just point out that Jesus isn’t making any mistakes in Capernaum. This isn’t simply a poorly chosen image or analogy. And, all the things he tells them (about eating his flesh and drinking his blood) isn’t Jesus digging himself in deeper and deeper. Jesus is saying exactly what he intended to say with surgical precision. He’s shaking them to life with this offensive imagery. And, it’s the perfect analogy for communicating the full measure of their need.

When we think about food and where it comes from, we most typically think of grocery stores and super markets. Maybe we think of farms somewhere far-away from us—farms snuggled in the midst of wide fields, with neatly painted red barns, and happy animals scattered about. For many of us, this is what comes to our minds when we think about food. This, however, wasn’t the case for those in Jesus’ time—nor for those throughout most of human history. When they thought about their food, they thought about death. In fact, they would’ve been the ones who were responsible for killing and butchering the animal. This was simply a necessary part of their lives. If they were to live, something else must die and be eaten.<sup>3</sup>

Friends, Jesus knew this and so did everyone else who was in that synagogue on that Saturday. This is essential background if we’re to understand this hard saying from Jesus. He wasn’t talking about real cannibalism. He wasn’t talking communion. He was talking about salvation—*about entering into eternal life!*

Jesus was talking about the gospel. He was preaching the good news.

These people were worried about getting earthly bread, just like we are today. They were worried about the next meal...and the next...and the next... and the next. They worried as we do about physical provisions. (Even here they want Jesus to talk about bread from heaven, physical bread.) But, Jesus wants to shift the conversation,

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<sup>3</sup> I believe I first heard D. A. Carson make this point. However, I cannot recall or locate the original source.

to shift their focus, to spiritual things—*spiritual life*. You can eat bread from heaven, Jesus tells them, but you'll still die like your forefathers did in the wilderness (v. 58). You need to feast on something greater. You need to long for something far greater. You need to trust in someone who can give you spiritual life.

Friends, Jesus is saying—I must be broken for you. I must die so you can live. You must feast upon that truth. And, you must long for more and more of me in you, or you will surely die. I am eternal life, Jesus says. Trust in me. Amen.