

WORDS OF LIFE

John 6:60-65

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“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63).

There are times when large numbers of people associate themselves with Jesus. Whole countries call themselves Christian, with large percentages attending church. In America, 26% of the population identify themselves as Evangelical Christians, according to a 2004 Pew survey.¹ But even in such situations, it is often the case that few are actual disciples of our Lord. A case in point is the crowd of people who flocked to Jesus after his miracle of feeding the five thousand. Jesus said of these so-called disciples, “There are some of you who do not believe” (Jn. 6:64). As events would show, very few of them stayed with Jesus. James Boice observes: “The Lord Jesus Christ had been popular... [But] as he began to teach, his doctrine became the measure of his followers’ discipleship, and most dropped away.”² So it often is when supposed discipleship is tested by the teaching of God’s Word.

HARD TEACHING

It is important for us to understand what the apostle John means when he refers to Jesus’ hearers as “disciples” (Jn. 6:60). Since this crowd was sitting under Jesus’ teaching, John applies this designation to them all. But we should distinguish them from Jesus’ twelve closest disciples, who had a very different relationship with the Lord. The crowd was attracted by Jesus’ extraordinary

¹ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *American Religious Landscape and Political Attitudes*, Sept. 9, 2004.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:530.

personality, and especially by his miracles. But they were noted for their grumbling and mur-muring (Jn. 6:41), their disputing among themselves (Jn. 6:52), and their refusal to believe (Jn. 6:64). In short, they were like multitudes who call themselves Christians today but who act in just this manner.

Jesus had just finished his sermon in the synagogue of Capernaum, and John tells us, “When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?’” (Jn. 6:60).

The word for “hard” (Greek, *skleros*) does not mean that Jesus’ teaching was difficult to understand. It was simply hard to accept. Arthur Pink explains, “It was not that they found the language of Christ so obscure as to be unintelligible, but what they had heard was so irreconcilable with their own views that they would not receive it.”³ Notice that they never asked him for clarification – he was clear enough! Instead, they complained among themselves about Jesus.

The key to receiving God’s Word is our willingness to accept instruction. The Bible confronts the errors of our thinking about God, ourselves, life, and salvation. God says, “My thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (Isa. 55:8). So we must come with the attitude of Psalm 25:5: “Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.” Proverbs 3:5 marks out the way of wisdom: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.”

This does not describe Jesus’ listeners on this occasion. Indeed, it is remarkable that when God’s own Son came into the world, his teaching was consistently rejected. This is what happened during Jesus’ earlier ministry in Jerusalem. At first, many people showed interest in his miracles. But it was clear to Jesus that their interest was mainly carnal and worldly (see Jn. 2:23-25). This is now repeated in his home district of Galilee. The same thing happens today, which is no surprise, since human nature is the same everywhere. Paul warned Timothy that this would take happen: “People will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth” (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

³ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 353.

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

If we ask what it was about Jesus' teaching that so offended his hearers, the answers are many. First, Jesus did not satisfy their worldly desires; while they wanted baked goods, he kept talking about bread for the soul. Second was the insinuation that Jesus was a figure greater than the Jews' revered Moses. Compared to the manna that came through Moses, Jesus is "the true bread from heaven" (Jn. 6:32). Whereas those who ate Moses' bread ultimately died in the desert, Jesus said of himself, "Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever" (Jn. 6:58). But far above these sources of distress was the scandal of Jesus' teaching about their need to eat his flesh and drink his blood, that is, his teaching about his coming death on the cross. "Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this?'" (Jn. 6:61).

The Greek word for "take offense" is *skandalizo*, from which we gain our word "scandalize." Here we confront the Bible's teaching about the scandal of Jesus' cross. This is what makes Christianity offensive to the human mind and heart. The Ten Commandments may not be appreciated, but they are not hated. The story of Jesus' birth is not offensive, and most people like the idea of a resurrection. But the cross? Here is a true offense to the natural man!

There are two reasons for the offense of the cross. The first is that it allows no place for men and women to save themselves. The cross condemns every kind of works salvation, since it proclaims that man in sin is so lost that only the death of the Son of God in his place can suffice for his deliverance. People are happy to believe in Jesus as a model to follow or as a lofty ethical teacher. But the cross proclaims us all as failures when it comes to following his example or fulfilling his ethics. J. Gresham Machen stated, "He is our Saviour, not because He has inspired us to live the same kind of life that He lived, but because He took upon Himself the dreadful guilt of our sins and bore it instead of us on the cross."⁴ This is a scandalous offense to the natural man, whose pride always wants to do something to commend himself to God.

⁴ J. Gresham Machen: *Christianity & Liberalism*, 117.

An example of this is provided in the Old Testament story of the Syrian general Naaman. He was a great man, but he suffered from leprosy. There was a Jewish slave girl in his household who told him about the prophet Elisha in Israel who could cure him. So Naaman went to Israel, taking “ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of clothes” (2 Ki. 5:5). When he came to Elisha’s door, the prophet merely sent a messenger out, saying, “Go and wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored, and you shall be clean” (2 Ki. 5:10). Naaman was furious. Why? Because the prophet did not treat him as a great man. He did not value his silver, gold, and fine clothing. Moreover, Elisha’s command to wash in the Jordan offended Naaman’s pride. He said, “Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them and be clean?” (2 Ki. 5:12). He had his own ideas of salvation, and the prophet’s ideas offended him. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

What the gospel says to every one of us is most galling to the natural man; it seems to him to be completely insulting and humiliating because it does not come and tell us that we have only to live a good life and that we have only to look at the Lord Jesus Christ and see his perfect example and then go out and follow him, practicing the imitation of Christ... No, says the gospel... The message is not to look at ‘Jesus’... as the great moral exemplar, the great teacher; it is, look at the gibbet, at a man with a crown of thorns upon his brow and an agonized expression on his face, crying out, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’... That is what you are called to look at – Jesus Christ and him crucified!⁵

The cross especially offended the Jews, who were so proud of their possession of the law, and who trusted for salvation in their observance of its ceremonies and in their moral superiority to the pagans. Paul said that while the gospel is foolishness to the Gentiles, it is a “stumbling block” to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).

This comes out in one of the great books of the ancient church, the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, published by the great apologist Justin Martyr around 150 A.D. One of the reasons Trypho would not accept Jesus was that the law said, “Cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree” (Dt. 21:23). He objected, “This so-called Christ of yours was

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1995), 137-138.

dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified.” Justin replied that the law also taught, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them” (Dt. 27:26). Justin pointed out that Jesus bore *our* curse on the cross. Whereas the Jews wanted to be rewarded for their virtue with a triumphant Messiah, God instead sent them a crucified Messiah in order to save them from their violations of the very law in which they took such pride.⁶ As Paul wrote, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). It is therefore only through faith in his cross – a scandal to Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles – that sinners can be forgiven and accepted by God.

The second way the cross offends is by its demand for an exclusive faith in Jesus Christ alone. This is perhaps the greatest scandal of Christianity in our own relativistic age. As long as we say, “Jesus is *a* way to salvation,” people are not offended. But when Jesus says that we must look to his cross in faith or else perish in our sins, that is a great offense. The same offense was a major issue in the ancient world of the apostles. Machen tells us:

What struck the early observers of Christianity most forcibly was not merely that salvation was offered by means of the Christian gospel, but that all other means were resolutely rejected. The early Christian missionaries demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion to Christ... Salvation was not merely through Christ, but it was only through Christ. In that little word ‘only’ lay all the offense. Without that word there would have been no persecutions... Without its exclusiveness, the Christian message would have seemed perfectly inoffensive to the men of that day. The offense of the Cross is done away, but so is the glory and the power.⁷

The cross of Christ is the very center of the Christian faith, and only by our allegiance to the biblical doctrine of the atonement – Christ’s substitutionary death to pay the penalty of our sin – can the church remain strong in the gospel. It is by rejecting the atonement that the liberal church has ceased to be Christian in any meaningful sense. An example is liberal bishop John Shelby Spong, whose writing on the cross may be extreme, but it is not unique: “A human father who

⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, in *Anti-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 1:210, 247.

⁷ Machen, 123-124.

would nail his son to a cross for any purpose would be arrested for child abuse... I would choose to loathe rather than to worship a deity who required the sacrifice of his son.”⁸

Such offense at Jesus’ cross is no longer restricted to liberal circles. The increasing liberalism of evangelical Christianity – especially in its postmodern forms – is best seen at this very point. British evangelical Steve Chalke published a recent and much-heralded book that condemned the biblical doctrine of the cross as a “twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith.” He described it as “a form of cosmic child abuse” that is inconsistent with the Bible’s emphasis on God’s love.⁹

But Jesus taught that he died for our sins precisely because of God’s love for us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn. 3:16). To take offense at the cross is to refuse Jesus’ only gospel. Paul wrote, “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” Notice that this is penal substitutionary atonement: “Christ died *for our sins*.” Paul added that if we reject the atonement we have “believed in vain” (1 Cor. 15:2-3).

Jesus asked, “Do you take offense at this?” (Jn. 6:61). If we do, it can only be because we refuse to humble ourselves before his cross, or that we refuse to accept Jesus alone as the exclusive Savior for the world, or because we have been taught to think like the world. But if we think the gospel hard to accept in light of the cross, it does not get any easier in light of Jesus’ resurrection and subsequent ascension into heaven. Jesus adds, “Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?” (Jn. 6:62). Jesus is a divine Savior, and his is a divine gospel that flows from a love and wisdom of God that confounds the conventional thinking of men.

NOT FLESH, BUT SPIRIT

This is why Christianity relies not on human strength, wisdom, or virtue, but only on the Spirit of God working through his Word. Jesus explained, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no

⁸ John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999), 95.

⁹ Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182.

avail. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63).

First, Jesus informs us that “the flesh is of no avail.” By “the flesh,” Jesus refers to men and women in their worldly, sinful state. This is why his hearers did not receive his gospel, because they responded to him in the flesh. They thought about his teaching with worldly minds and responded to Jesus with proud, carnal hearts. John’s statement in verse 64 is one more proof of Jesus’ deity: “Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.” He also knew why they did not believe: they were fleshly and not spiritual; their hearts were hard and their spirits were dead. This is why Jesus affirms again a principle he had earlier taught: “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father” (Jn. 6:65; cf. Jn. 6:44).

Salvation is by grace alone – that is, as an unmerited gift from God. Salvation can only be by grace because man in the flesh is unable to come to Jesus. Notice that Jesus says not merely that his hearers were not willing to come, but that unless the Father grants it, “no one *can* come to me.” This means that while salvation is received through faith alone, faith is itself the gracious gift of God (see Eph. 2:8-9). Faith is not something we contribute to God, but something God contributes to us by the ministry of his Holy Spirit, so that through faith in Christ his will for our salvation might be achieved.

Given Jesus’ teaching, we should never be dismayed by the world’s fleshly opposition to Jesus and his gospel. Of course people are disinterested in the gospel. Of course people want the church to be worldly and not holy. Of course the worldly media hates Christianity. Of course there is slander and persecution towards believers. But this should not cause us to rethink our strategy in serving Jesus. Nor should we despair of success in gospel ministry. Why not? Because, Jesus adds, “It is the Spirit who gives life” (Jn. 6:63).

Just as God the Father sent his Son because the world was lost in sin, so also the Father and Son together have sent the Holy Spirit to bring faith in the gospel because the flesh is of no avail. The Spirit “gives life” to those who are dead in sin. This is our confidence in witnessing, in ministry, and in our own hopes for spiritual growth. We preach the gospel in all its scandal because we know that God the

Father has chosen sinners for salvation. We preach the gospel in all its foolishness because we know that Jesus Christ died to redeem his people. And we preach the gospel boldly because we know that the Spirit is at work bringing life through the Word of God.

Knowing this preserves us from appeals to the flesh in our witness and ministry. Arthur Pink writes:

All fleshly activities amount to nothing where the regeneration of dead sinners is concerned. Neither the logical arguments advanced by the mind, hypnotic powers brought to bear upon the will, touching appeals made to the emotions, beautiful music and hearty singing to catch the ear, nor sensuous trappings to draw the eye – none of these are of the slightest avail in stirring dead sinners. It is not the choir, nor the preacher, but ‘the Spirit that [gives life].’¹⁰

This does not mean that we do not reason with unbelieving neighbors or appeal to the will. This does not condemn beautiful music in the church, any more than it does passionate preaching. But in all of these, we follow Jesus’ example of relying on the Spirit to bring life through the faithful proclamation of scandalous truth. This especially urges that our ministry in Christ’s name mirror his own spiritual priorities as presented all through the Gospels and particularly in John chapter 6. Pink writes:

What is urgently needed today is not mesmeric experts who have made a study of how to produce a religious ‘atmosphere,’ nor religious showmen to make people laugh one minute and weep the next, but faithful preaching of God’s Word, with the saints on their faces before God, humbly praying that He may be pleased to send His quickening Spirit into their midst.¹¹

WORDS OF LIFE

The sure sign that we are relying on God’s Spirit is that we greatly esteem the Word of God. Jesus said, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63). This tells us that “The Spirit is the Divine Agent; the Word is the Divine instrument.”¹² Our trust is in God alone; our ministry, empowered by prayer, is through the Holy Scriptures. How are men, women, and children to

¹⁰ Pink, 356-357.

¹¹ Ibid., 357.

¹² Ibid.

believe in Jesus? James 1:18 says, “Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth.” Peter writes, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23). Hebrews adds, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Jesus’ words are “spirit and life.” So Paul declared: “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:2).

Not only is the Word of Christ in all of the Bible essential for our ministry, but it is essential for us as individuals. Do you long for more of the Spirit and for a more vibrant spiritual life? Jesus commends you to his Word. The way to have the Spirit is to have the Word, which the Spirit inspired for our sakes. The way to be spiritual is to be biblical. Just as trees and plants grow strong and lush as they are well watered, so also do believers grow strong and firm, happy and holy, when they are well watered with the Word of life. Do we want our marriages to grow in joy and love? Then let husbands and wives devote themselves together to God’s Word. Do we desire our children to trust in Jesus and live in godliness? Then let us minister to them – at home and in the church – with the Spirit-filled, life-giving Word of God. Paul put it simply: “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17).

Lastly, do you look upon Jesus from the outside, standing with this crowd of false disciples who did not believe? Do you desire to come to Christ, but lack the power in and of yourself? Then devote yourself to his Word in the Bible, asking God to use the Scriptures to break into your mind and heart with the power of the Spirit and the life that Jesus has to give. As Justin Martyr asserted to Trypho, the Scriptures contain “words filled with the Spirit of God, and big with his power, and flourishing with grace.”¹³

The Christian apologist Ravi Zacharius tells the story of a drive he took some years ago with an evangelist in the nation of Lebanon. Lebanon was then occupied by the Syrian Army and their control was

¹³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, 199.

quite repressive. He and the pastor were driving in a van that was loaded with boxes of Bibles they were transporting to another city. He tells of his great anxiety as they stopped at a military checkpoint and a Syrian soldier stuck his rifle into their faces. “What is in this van?” the soldier demanded. Zacharius was horrified when the evangelist replied, “Oh, nothing but boxes of dynamite!” Then, handing the shocked soldier one of the Bibles, the bold pastor explained. “Here is what I am talking about. Read this and it will break into your life in a way that no earthly power ever can.” So it is! The Word of God alone can overcome every stronghold of sin and unbelief, bringing life by the Spirit of God, through our faith in the crucified and ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Shouldn’t we, then, recommit ourselves – in practice, not just in creed – to the Bible: ready to learn from the Lord, willing to be corrected and rebuked, believing the doctrines of the Bible, and leading lives that reflect confidence in the power of God’s Word, since Jesus says to us, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (Jn. 6:63).