

**The Gospel of John**  
**Session Thirteen: Many Disciples Desert Jesus**  
**Commentary**

**John 6:60-71**

6:60–63. All so-called followers of Jesus are not true disciples. Many who are called “disciples” cannot tolerate what they consider to be the teaching of cannibalism. Jesus tried to help them understand that a wooden, literal interpretation of his words about flesh and blood would not lead them to the truth. It is the Holy Spirit who explains the spiritual meaning of his words.

We have already learned that faith is mental assent and spiritual appropriation. Now Jesus added the component of personal commitment. And personal commitment comes through spiritual truth. In verse 41 we read that “the Jews began to grumble,” and now in verse 61 we read that his disciples were grumbling. This was not the Twelve who got special treatment at the beginning of verse 67, but many who had attached themselves to Jesus and called themselves “disciples.” According to Carson, “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” (Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991, 300).

This parallels closely 2:23–25 where all “believers” are not believers. The issue in biblical Christianity is regeneration—heart change produced by the Holy Spirit—not labels, not affiliations, not personal claims, not religious acts or pilgrimages, and certainly not the keeping of religious laws. And let us not miss in verse 60 that the teaching is hard to accept.

Jesus did not skip a theological beat over this grumbling. In rapid-fire verses he talked about the ascension and the Holy Spirit. Only those willing to allow God’s Spirit to illumine their understanding of God’s Word can find in it the very substance of life. As we shall see, John had more to say about the Holy Spirit than the other three Gospels put together. John clearly recorded Jesus’ intentional link of resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit (7:37–39).

But we still struggle with the phrase the flesh counts for nothing, especially in view of Jesus’ repeated insistence that they eat his flesh. Morris explains, “A woodenly literal, flesh-dominated manner of looking at Jesus’ words will not yield the correct interpretation. That is granted only to the spiritual man, the Spirit-dominated man. Such words cannot be comprehended by the fleshly, whose horizon is bounded by this earth and its outlook. Only as the life-giving Spirit informs him may a man understand these words” (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 385).

Perhaps the mention of the ascension in verse 62 switches the thought from eating the flesh of Jesus (spiritual appropriation of the cross) to depending on the flesh of humanity (trusting one's own strength for eternal salvation). We are reminded here of 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul's contrast between the spirit and the letter.

6:64–66. Some of these disciples did not believe, and Jesus knew their hearts. This may be a specific reference to Judas's betrayal. Serious hard teaching about the cross and substitutionary atonement is no more palatable to the modern mind than it was to the first-century mind. Personal commitment comes through spiritual truth and heavenly enabling.

We are almost astonished to find Jesus turning again to the subject we have called "election" as an explanation for the unbelief and departure of false disciples. How does one participate in this heavenly bread? How does one come to the Bread of Life in order to receive eternal life? Only because the Father makes it possible.

6:67–71. The half-hearted followers were gone, and only the Twelve were left. When asked whether they also wished to leave, Peter affirmed their faith in Christ's divine appointment. Somehow he understood the exclusivity of Jesus' claim to be the sole source of eternal life. There is no other option.

Personal commitment comes through individual choice. Peter's answer became a high-water mark of spiritual insight given him on this occasion by the Holy Spirit. And here we see it again—believing is seeing: We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Peter would not understand the full meaning of his own words until after the resurrection. Jesus had just said to the crowd, "the words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (v. 63). Peter affirmed that true disciples agree and accept that conclusion. Morris helps us with the grammar of Peter's response: "The verbs 'have believed' and 'know' are both in the perfect tense and this should be given its full force. 'We have come to a place of faith and continue there. We have entered into knowledge and retain it'" (Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, 390).

Then Jesus singled out the betrayer and calls him a diabolos, the actual word used for Satan in other places in Scripture. Judas surely knew his own heart, but he said nothing when Peter affirmed a collective faith in verse 69. Writing much later, John feared some of his readers might misunderstand Jesus' words, so he added the explanation of verse 71.

We must be careful, especially amid so much talk of God's choosing and drawing people to himself, that we do not edge into a theology of reprobation when we find the word chosen in connection with Judas. "The text does not say that Jesus determined Judas would become a devil. The servant of the devil performed a task necessary in the opening of salvation to the world (cf. Luke 22:22). But great care must be taken lest God be blamed for the evil of Judas. The biblical message does not blame God for evil. The rebellious heart is to blame. Here Jesus chose Judas, but Judas was a willful devil (6:70)" (Borchert, Gerald L. *John*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996, 276).

Peter's rhetorical question seems a good place to end our study of chapter 6: Lord, to whom shall we go? To whom indeed. To the multiple bizarre cults all around us today? To the false religions of the world? To the secular ideology of a barbarian and materialistic society? To a careless indifference which postpones eternal questions of eternal life until some more convenient time? To the sickening sadism and sex of a hedonistic society gone mad? Bad choices all. Even in times of our own spiritual weakness, the options are futile. We must stand with Peter and against the crowds that wander off from the message of the cross. Jesus is the only way to the Father and the only source of life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gangel, Kenneth O. *Holman New Testament Commentary: John*. Edited by Max E. Anders. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000).