



The Gospel of John

Session 13: Many Disciples Desert Jesus

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

This week's lesson concludes the lengthy John 6 narrative. After Jesus fed the crowd of 5,000, they followed Him to Capernaum. Jesus challenged them saying, *"You are looking for me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate the loaves and were filled"* (John 6:26). He then taught that His body and blood were the real food and drink that must be received for the forgiveness of sins.

Many in the crowd left Him after this, but Peter boldly declared on behalf of the twelve, *"To whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life"* (John 6:68).

The passage ends with Jesus's prediction that Judas would betray Him. We'll examine the difference between proximity to Jesus and saving faith and will be encouraged to walk closely with Him.

TODAY'S SCRIPTURES

John 6:60-71

THE MAIN IDEA

Many in the crowd left Jesus, saying His teaching was too hard to follow. Peter, however, responded, *"To whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life."* When we walk closely with Jesus, we come to recognize He is the only One who offers abundant life and hope for eternity.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

How is embracing Jesus's teaching or His promises hard for you right now? What might it look like to draw near to Him in faith?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 6:60-66 When Jesus said His body and blood were real food to be taken in, many in the crowd departed. Listening to Jesus was one thing; receiving Jesus was another. For every person, there is a point where we must step from spiritual curiosity to committed surrender and faith. This is the "narrow way" Jesus said not all will follow (Matthew 7:13-14).

John 6:67-69 After the masses departed, Jesus questions the disciples, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" Following Jesus would only get harder from there, and He wanted the disciples to determine whether to stay or go. Peter's response on behalf of the twelve demonstrated their growing faith and commitment to Christ. We must also choose whether we will follow Christ by faith or walk away.

John 6:70-71 Judas had proximity to Jesus but lacked commitment to Him. These are not the same and don't have the same result.



START HERE

As we examine today's text, look for ways you might identify with one of the three sets of people—the crowd who left Jesus, saying His teachings were too hard, the disciples, who claimed only Jesus had the words of eternal life, or Judas, who would walk away in disbelief and betrayal. Where would you put yourself in the story now, and where would you put yourself in the story before coming to Christ?

DISCUSS

What does it mean for you personally that Jesus is the only One who “[has] the words of eternal life”?

ADDING CLARITY

Jesus knew from the beginning which disciple would eventually betray Him. At this point many who had followed Jesus ceased to do so. When Jesus asked the Twelve if they too wished to depart, Peter responded for them all: “Lord, to whom shall we go? We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Hard Words; Hardened Hearts

John 6:60-66: Therefore, when many of his disciples heard this, they said, “This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?”

Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, asked them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to observe the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh doesn't help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some among you who don't believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning those who did not believe and the one who would betray him.) He said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father.”

From that moment many of his disciples turned back and no longer accompanied him.

Unpacking John 6:60-66

Some illusions fade as one draws near to them. Consider a magician's performance: When you sit in the audience, the trick seems real. But the closer you get to the stage—the more you see behind the curtain—the more the illusion is revealed. The miracle is not a miracle at all.



But Jesus operates in the opposite direction. The closer you get to Him, the clearer the truth becomes and the deeper your faith grows. In John 6, many saw Jesus's miracles but resisted His message. The disciples moved from belief to conviction. Judas also saw everything, yet walked away. This passage invites us to ask not just what we've seen, but what we've done with what we've seen.

As you may recall from last week's lesson, Jesus and the disciples—after feeding the 5,000—traveled across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum. A large crowd followed Him, perhaps seeking another miraculous meal. Instead, Jesus pointed to Himself as the ultimate bread from heaven, saying, *“Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day”* (John 6:53-54). Jesus is eternal, and more substantive than the manna that God gave the Israelites in the desert. His claim that His flesh and blood were real food and drink offended some of the hearers and proved to be beyond what they could comprehend.

Therefore, when many of his disciples heard this, they said, “This teaching is hard. Who can accept it?” (v. 60). The disciples (referring to the totality of the crowd, not just the twelve disciples), wanted the miracle more than they wanted relationship. They were happy to receive free food from Jesus, but when His teaching required a commitment to Christ by faith, they wavered. It is easy, especially in some cultural contexts like the South, to be a part of the cultural church crowd without every truly coming to faith. When Jesus fed the crowd and talked about heaven, the masses welcomed Him. When Jesus spoke about sacrifice and obedience, they began to walk away. We must be careful, as followers of Christ, to receive the full measure of God's Word, resisting the urge to pick and choose what we want to believe. Christ is the living Word of God (John 1:1), and that means we must take Him at all of His word, not just the parts that are easy to digest. God's Word is true and eternal. Its authority is established by God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, not by our obedience to “accept it” (v. 60).

Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, asked them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to observe the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? The Spirit is the one who gives life. The flesh does not help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. But there are some among you who don't believe” (vv. 61-64). The problem for these disciples was spiritual resistance, not intellectual difficulty. When Jesus taught on what He could provide for them, they were all in. When the conversation turned to what would be required from them, they turned away. The real mark of a growing disciple is not in the accumulation of knowledge, but in the growing depth of obedience. Jesus's question showed that their stumbling was over His authority, not confusion over His words.

If these disciples struggled to accept Jesus's teaching while He was right in front of them, how would they respond to His teaching after His ascension (v. 62)? Many of these individuals would never see Jesus's resurrected body or witness Him going back to heaven. They would have to receive by faith the testimony of others. After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciple, Thomas, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet*



believe” (John 20:29). We are those who have come to Christ by faith in the words written in the Bible and the testimony of people who profess Jesus as Lord.

(For Jesus knew from the beginning those who did not believe and the one who would betray him.) He said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted to him by the Father” (vv. 64b-65). Jesus concluded by acknowledging two facts: He knew those who wouldn’t believe, and He knew His betrayer in advance. This is important because there have been people who have hypothesized that Jesus was somehow duped by Judas, and did not know He would be betrayed. This verse, combined with Jesus’s words at the Last Supper in all four Gospels (Matthew 26:24-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:21-23; John 13:21-30), show that Jesus did, in fact, know He would be betrayed, and He knew that Judas was His betrayer.

Second, in verse 65, Jesus said coming to faith is more than seeing miracles, or intellectual acknowledgement that Jesus is the Messiah. No one can come to Christ unless it is granted by the Father. This mirrors Jesus’s words in John 6:44, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”* The Father draws us to salvation, granted on behalf of Christ’s work on the cross, not by our own efforts, and sealed by the Holy Spirit for eternity (Ephesians 1:13-14). While the complexity of soteriology (the theology of salvation) is broader than we can examine today, it is important to note all three members of the Trinity are involved in and responsible for our salvation, as we are drawn to Christ by the Father, and through the conviction and keeping of the Holy Spirit.

From that moment many of his disciples turned back and no longer accompanied him (John 6:66). Jesus’s words caused His followers to examine their motives. Were they following Jesus for the right reasons, ready to set aside their very lives to follow Him, or was their interest temporary and self-serving? Sadly, the knowledge that following Christ meant complete sacrifice, was more than many of them could bear. It’s not hard to imagine the sound of their sandals striking the hard dirt road as they turned and walked away. This crowd proved themselves to be fair-weather followers of Jesus. When the hard teaching came, and real sacrifice was required, they walked away.

Proximity to Jesus is not the same as faith in Him. When we come to faith, we do not accept Christ on our terms, but on His. Likewise, we cannot choose only to accept the parts of Christ we affirm. Sincere faith in Jesus means giving all of who we are to all of who He is. Charles Spurgeon wrote, *“If you believe what you like in the gospel, and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.”* These followers decided that the cost of following Jesus was greater than they wanted to pay. Sadly, they walked away.

Just as some audience members enjoy a magician’s tricks but reject the explanation behind them, the crowd enjoyed Jesus’ signs but rejected the truth He revealed. The crowds turned back when Jesus’s words challenged them, but the disciples responded differently. Their belief did not start with full understanding, but their commitment opened the door for deeper knowledge.



DISCUSS

- *What of Jesus's teaching caused the crowd to say, "This teaching is hard—who can accept it?" What made this difficult to accept?*
- *Where do you see yourself celebrating Jesus's blessings but resisting His harder teachings?*
- *What "hard saying" of Jesus do you need to embrace this week?*

2. From Believing to Knowing

John 6:67-69: *So Jesus said to the Twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."*

Unpacking John 6:67-69

A magician's trick looks impossible until you learn how it works. Knowledge transforms wonder into understanding. For some, getting closer spoils the fun—once you know how it works, the joy of the experience is lost. But with Jesus, the more the disciples walked with Him, the more they discovered that the miracle was *real*. Their belief deepened into certainty because the closer they came, the more truth they found—not illusion. The same is true for us. Some may have come to Christ at an early age—childlike belief drawing you to God. However, as we walk with Christ over the years, our increasing knowledge deepens our experience of faith.

So Jesus said to the Twelve, "You don't want to go away too, do you?" (v. 67). As the ambivalent crowd turned to walk away, Jesus offered the twelve disciples the same opportunity. If they chose to follow Him, things would only get harder from there. A faith built on free food or drawing large crowds would not be enough to sustain them. In fact, there would come a day prophesied in the Old Testament and affirmed by Jesus, when the *"The shepherd [would be stuck], and the sheep will be scattered"* (Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31). If the disciples wouldn't go the distance, this was the time to leave.

The disciples must choose Jesus freely, even as He taught the Father draws people to Himself. In these verses, it's as if the answer to the question, *"Does God draw or do we draw near?"* is simply, "Yes." Jesus draws us near. We must say "yes" to Him.

Simon Peter answered, "Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Peter, often the spokesperson of the disciples, answered on their behalf. If Jesus was not the Messiah, they had nowhere else to turn. After experiencing Christ's teachings and witnessing His miracles, returning to their old religious system would no longer satisfy. For them it was Jesus—or nothing. Here, Peter's answer was similar to the Great Confession (Matthew 16:16; Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20) where Peter also spoke on behalf of the twelve, saying, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*



Peter continued, stating, *“We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God”* (John 6:69). True faith starts as belief and grows into settled conviction. Peter and the other disciples first expressed trust in Jesus *“You have the words of eternal life.”* As they spent time in His presence, that trust matured into a deepening conviction, *“We have come to believe and know.”*

Later in his life, the apostle John, who penned this Gospel, wrote, *“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know the true one. We are in the true one—that is, in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life”* (1 John 5:20). Our faith increases as we walk with Christ and hold onto His teachings. True discipleship is marked by proximity and perseverance. The apostles stayed with Jesus because they recognized He offered them something that could not be found anywhere else—the hope and promise of eternal life.

Walking closely with Jesus doesn’t mean we won’t encounter trials or losses. It doesn’t mean life will always be easy—many of the apostles would end up dying for their faith. Walking with Jesus doesn’t mean all of our questions will be answered. What it does mean, however, is we recognize that true life is only found in Him. As Elizabeth Elliot wrote, *“Faith does not eliminate questions. But faith knows where to take them.”*

But even among those who walked most closely with Jesus, not all believed. Judas heard the same words, saw the same miracles, and shared the same journey—yet chose a different path. As we look at the last verses of this text, look for ways to contrast Peter and the other disciples’ growing faith with Judas’s growing contempt. It’s helpful to ask ourselves: *When I encounter Jesus’s teachings, do I desire to draw closer to Him, or do I seek ways to continue life on my own terms?*

DISCUSS

- *How did Peter’s response show growth from belief to knowledge?*
- *When have you moved from simply believing something about Jesus to knowing it through experience?*
- *What practice this week can help deepen your conviction in Christ?*

3. Judas and the Tragedy of Unresolved Unbelief

John 6:70-71: *Jesus replied to them, “Didn’t I choose you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” He was referring to Judas, Simon Iscariot’s son, one of the Twelve, because he was going to betray him.*

Unpacking John 6:70-71

A magician’s assistant knows all the secrets behind the curtain. They see what others don’t. But imagine an assistant who knows the illusions yet resents the magician and refuses to trust him.



Their knowledge never produces admiration, only bitterness. Judas saw everything, heard everything, and knew the inner workings of Jesus's ministry. But instead of belief, his familiarity bred contempt. Judas proves that one can witness Jesus up close and still refuse to trust. His story becomes a cautionary tale for us today—it is not enough to simply witness and acknowledge Christ's teachings—real faith requires surrender and a commitment to follow Him.

Jesus replied to them, "Didn't I choose you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil." He was referring to Judas, Simon Iscariot's son, one of the Twelve, because he was going to betray him" (John 6:70-71). Jesus's words show that outward closeness is not the same as inward loyalty. Judas had the same opportunity as the other eleven—he was invited to "Come, follow me" (Matthew 4:19). Judas may indeed have followed Jesus on foot, but his heart was not along for the journey. Jesus's words also demonstrate His own sovereignty. Jesus chose Judas with full awareness of what he would do. He knows man's heart. His choice of Judas was not an oversight or vulnerability, rather a demonstration of His own sovereign choice and power.

In a few weeks, we will examine the story of Mary (and her sister, Martha) who threw a dinner party for Jesus. During the meal, Mary took a large jar of expensive perfume, and anointed Jesus's feet with the oil. It was an act of worship and in preparation for His burial. But we receive this insight: *Then one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot (who was about to betray him), said, "Why wasn't this perfume sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" He didn't say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the money-bag and would steal part of what was put in it (John 12:4-6).*

While Judas had the same proximity and opportunity as the other disciples, his heart nurtured disbelief and contempt. In unguarded moments, like in the home of Mary and Martha, he exposed his true motivation. As Jesus said in Luke 6:45, *"A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."* Jesus' words, and Judas' example, however, beg the question, *"How do we fill out hearts with good things and guard our hearts against evil?" (NIV).*

Over time, Judas was swayed by proximity to power and his own selfish desires. John's description of Judas in John 12:4-6 imply that theft was an ongoing sin. He didn't empty the coffers in one dramatic moment. Instead, his character and commitment to Christ were chipped away, a little at a time, until the full force of his betrayal moved from private vice to public betrayal. People rarely blow up their lives in one, show-stopping moment. Rather, over time, sin carries them farther from Christ. James 1:14-15 says, *"But each person is tempted when he is drawn away and enticed by his own evil desire. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and when sin is fully grown, it gives birth to death."* We should be on guard in our own lives against desires, habits, or behaviors that could slowly erode our faith. When we recognize these things, we should confess our sin to God and seek accountability from other believers. The impact of indulging sin might look small in the beginning, but Judas's story shows the catastrophic way in which sin snowballs over time when left unchecked.



Second, we should recognize that proximity to Jesus and His church is not the same as knowing Him. No amount of Bible Study, church attendance, volunteering, or doing any other “good deed” will get us into heaven. We are all sinners (Romans 3:23) who deserve death and eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). However, Christ died to pay the price for our sin and make it possible for us to be reconciled to God (Romans 5:8). The path to an authentic, saving faith in Christ is not found in going to church, but in confessing our sin and surrendering our lives to Jesus (Romans 10:9-10). All who call on Him by faith will be saved (Romans 10:13).

Judas walked with Jesus and the other disciples for three years and yet never fully surrendered to Christ. Instead of confession and repentance from his selfishness and sin, he doubled down and was carried away to devastating consequences. If you’ve never by faith accepted Christ, today could be the day that changes the trajectory of your life, if you will come to Him.

For followers of Jesus, Judas’s story can serve as a cautionary tale of the slow creep that can lead astray. The need is clear—walk closely with Jesus. Like Peter, we stay close to Jesus when we recognize there is nowhere else to go for satisfaction in this life—not from the things of this world and certainly not by our efforts—outside of walking closely with Christ.

DISCUSS

- *What did Jesus’s statement about Judas (“one of you is a devil”) reveal about His awareness of Judas’s heart?*
- *Where might unresolved sin or hidden motives be quietly hardening your own heart?*
- *What step can you take this week to guard your heart from slow spiritual erosion?*

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

Which of the three responses to Jesus—the crowd, the disciples, or Judas—do you most identify with today, and why?

How does Peter’s confession resonate with your own growing understanding of what satisfies?

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

What is one specific action step you will take this week to move from observing Jesus to fully following Him?



APPLY

Write a brief prayer of praise to God recounting the moment you realized He was the only One that could satisfy what Blaise Pascal referred to as the “God-sized hole” in your heart.

REFERENCES

Charles Spurgeon, *Sermons*, Vol. 37, “Christ and His Co-Workers” (1881).

Elisabeth Elliot, *A Path Through Suffering* (Baker Publishing, 1990), p. 91.