

SERIES: Gospel of John: Seeing is Believing?
 SERMON: *Unless You Eat the Flesh of the Son*
 SCRIPTURE: John 6, Part 1
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
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Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism

Christian Smith, a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame, has done some significant research on the faith of youth and young adults. In his book *Soul Searching* he describes the faith of American teenagers as moralistic, therapeutic, deism. Let me explain what this means. Most teenagers in America (and I would say, based off of my limited observations, most people in general) believe that God wants people to be moral; he wants them to be nice to other people. And people generally believe that good moral people go to heaven when they die. This is what Smith means by moralistic. Most teenagers in America also believe that the basic goal in life is to be happy and live a fulfilled life and God can help you live your best life now; Jesus can be your therapist or your life coach. This is what Smith means by therapeutic. Lastly, they believe that God created everything and keeps watch over everything, but God basically stays hands-off unless we really need him. This is what Smith means by deism.

Well, what's wrong with moralistic, therapeutic, deism? It sounds so pleasant – be nice, be happy, ask God for help when you need it. The main problem with moralistic, therapeutic, deism is that it is not Christian.

The Christian worldview doesn't say that good people go to heaven when they die if they do nice things. The Christian worldview says that we are all dead in our sins, by nature sinners, children of wrath (Eph 1:1-3). The Christian worldview isn't about Jesus meeting our felt needs so that we can live a happy and fulfilled life. The Christian worldview says that Jesus died to meet our biggest need. Jesus died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3) and to provide eternal life to whoever believes (Jn 3:16). The Christian worldview doesn't say that God is hands off until we need him. The Christian worldview says God takes the initiative in salvation before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4), and that in the fullness of time God sent forth his Son (Gal 4:4).

The moralistic, therapeutic, deistic worldview puts man at the center – all of life is about what God can do for man's temporary needs and what man can do for God. This worldview has no need for the Jesus revealed in the Bible. The Christian worldview on the other hand puts Christ at the center – all of life is about what God has done for us in Christ in taking care of our eternal need for forgiveness of sin and salvation from eternal death.

In a culture that is all about man, the customer is king. And we see this even in the church. After all it is important that our churches grow, right? And so, the church tends to cater to felt needs to get people in the door. I'm not saying this is good or bad. But as we look at our text in John 6 this morning we see a stark contrast between a consumer-driven culture and Jesus' approach to the crowd. Jesus is not interested in winning a popularity contest or meeting the people's felt needs. He doesn't seem interested in a church growth strategy either. Michael

Horton quotes Robert Godfrey in calling John 6 “Jesus’ church shrinkage strategy.”¹ He starts with 5,000 and ends with 12; 5,000 consumers leave and 12 disciples stay. Why did this happen? Open your Bibles to John 6.

Feeding the 5,000 – the fourth sign

In verses 1-15 Jesus feeds the 5,000. This is the fourth sign in the book of John (4 of 7). Remember in the book of John the signs are more than just miracles, they tell us something significant about Jesus. And the intent of the signs is that we would *see and believe* that Jesus is the Christ the Son of God and therefore have life in his name (20:30-31). So, how does this sign show us that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; what is the significance of the sign?

Thankfully, Jesus tells us. The crowds don’t see the significance of the signs, so Jesus explains it to them in what has been called the bread of life discourse in verses 25-70. We’ll cover this chapter over the next two weeks. Let’s read part of it now.

John 6:22-36, 47-59 (ESV)

²² *On the next day the crowd that remained on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not entered the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. ²³Other boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. ²⁴So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.*

²⁵ *When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” ²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? ³¹Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³²Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. ³³For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” ³⁴They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”*

³⁵ *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

⁴⁷ *Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹I 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.”*

¹ White Horse Inn. “Consumers or Disciples?”

⁵²The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” ⁵³So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. ⁵⁴Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. ⁵⁵For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. ⁵⁸This 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.” ⁵⁹Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum.

The bread of life discourse is actually less of a discourse and more of a dialogue. We’ll simply follow the movements in this dialogue.

After feeding the 5,000, verse 15 tells us that Jesus perceived the crowd wanted to take him by force and make him king, so he withdrew to the mountain. Eventually he crossed over from the east side of the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum on the west side. If you want to know more about that journey ask some of the people who just returned from Israel, they made this trip by boat. But Jesus made his trip by different means; he walked on the water (vv. 16-21).

Verse 24 tells us “...the crowd...went to Capernaum seeking Jesus.” This is the setting of the dialogue that ensues. The crowds begin the dialogue by asking Jesus a question. Look at verse 25. “When did you come here?” Jesus doesn’t even answer their question. Instead, he indicts them in verse 26. “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw the signs (cf. v. 2), but because you at your fill of the loaves.”

The crowds want to know what Jesus can do for them. They go to him like he’s a food pantry, or a food stamp distributor, which shows they didn’t understand the significance of the sign. That’s kind of like Christian Smith’s observation that religion has become therapeutic in America, we want to know how God can help us live our best life now, have our needs met and be happy.

The crowd is going to him for the wrong reasons. And so he says to them in verse 27. “Do not [work] for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.”

Jesus urges them to seek him for the solution to their real problem that they have yet to see. Jesus urges them to seek him for eternal life. Jesus is saying to them, “Don’t put all of your time and energy seeking me to meet your felt needs. There are deeper needs that need met.”

We live in a fallen world full of sin and that’s why there is hunger, sickness, and death. These are the symptoms of the fall. The crowd goes to Jesus to have their symptoms treated. They fail to see that Jesus can provide a cure for the disease.

It’s not that all of our felt needs are unimportant. I’m not saying that we shouldn’t seek Jesus to meet us in our physical needs. And I’m not saying that we shouldn’t seek to alleviate the needs of those who are sick and hungry. Jesus cares about real needs like hunger and sickness and he is able to provide. But he also realizes these aren’t the biggest needs and these are not the main

problems he came to address at his first advent. When he returns all sickness and death will be done away with, but until then we need to look for him for forgiveness of sins and eternal life. We need to look beyond our physical needs to our spiritual needs.

At Thanksgiving we are reminded to be thankful for many things. Most of us will eat a huge meal on Thursday and that should remind us that one of the things we can be thankful for is the fact that we have plenty to eat. But let's realize that there is so much more to be thankful for than food and health and family. God sent his Son to take care of our deepest need; forgiveness of sins and the provision of eternal life.

Continuing the dialogue, the crowd responds to Jesus' command with another question that seems to indicate they understand he is calling them to focus on their spiritual needs. Look at verse 28. *"What must we do to be doing the works of God?"*

You may be wondering what they mean by *"the works of God."* The NIV draws out the meaning: *"What must we do to do the works God requires?"* They want to know what they can do to earn God's favor. This is the natural response of man and the driving force of all religions, except Christianity. This is what Christian Smith meant when he said that religion in America is largely moralistic. People think they can actually work their way to God, they think they can earn God's favor. The crowd shows no understanding that eternal life is a gift from God. How does Jesus respond to this view?

Look at Jesus' response to their question in verse 29. *"This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."*

What does God require? He requires that we believe in Jesus. That is the only work that is acceptable to God, because it is the only thing that makes what God has done in Christ the basis of being accepted by God.

Sermon in a sentence: Don't seek Jesus to meet your temporary needs, believe in Jesus and you will have eternal life.

I'm not saying we shouldn't bring our needs to Jesus, but that can't be our primary motivation in seeking Jesus. Jesus came to bring eternal life and the only way to receive that is by believing in Jesus. What specifically do we need to believe about Jesus to have eternal life? As we continue to follow this dialogue we'll see three things we must believe about Jesus to have eternal life.

1. BELIEVE JESUS IS THE CHRIST, THE ONE SENT TO PROVIDE ETERNAL LIFE.

Verse 29 tells us that Jesus is sent from God. In other words he is the Christ. And he calls the crowd to believe in him as the Christ. In response they ask him for a sign. Look at verses 30-31. *"What sign do you do that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"*

They're throwing down a challenge. In the messianic age it was expected that the Christ would bring down manna from heaven again, like Moses.² They claim if Jesus would do that, then they would believe.

How does Jesus respond to their challenge? He takes their expectation and turns it on its head. Look at verses 32-33. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."*

First of all, he lets them know that it wasn't Moses that brought down manna from heaven; it was God. Secondly, he lets them know that not only is God able bring down manna from heaven; Jesus is the true bread from heaven. It's as if Jesus is taking them gently by the chin and directing their gaze at him.³ They are looking in the wrong places and at the wrong things. He wants them to see him for who he really is.

Look at verse 35. *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."*

They came to him to have their bellies filled; to have their temporary needs met. He's saying he's the bread of eternal life. He can satisfy their spiritual hunger in such a way that they will never be hungry again. He can satisfy their spiritual thirst in such a way that they will never be thirsty again. The phrasing in the Greek here is the most emphatic way to negate something. When he addresses our biggest need, he does so completely.

Why? Because he is the Christ, the one sent from God to provide eternal life. They need to believe this about Jesus if they want eternal life. And why is he able to satisfy their spiritual hunger and thirst into eternity? That brings us to the second thing that one must believe about Jesus?

2. BELIEVE JESUS IS THE SON OF GOD, WHO HAS LIFE IN HIMSELF.

Notice in verse 35 Jesus starts by saying *"I am the bread of life."* This phrase is repeated in verses 48 and 51. Skip down to verse 47-51, *"Truly, truly, I say to you. Whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever..."*

These three "I am" statements are the first of the seven "I am" statements in John. Why is this significant?

In the Old Testament when God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush. He gave Moses a commission to go to Egypt and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses asked God what he should tell the Israelites God's name was. God replied, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). So,

² Don Carson. *The Gospel According to John*.

³ White Horse Inn. "Consumers or Disciples?"

when Jesus says, *I am* the bread of life he is making a claim to deity. Not only is Jesus sent from God, he is the living bread from heaven, God with us, the great I AM.

One reason Jesus is able to give eternal life is because he is God. He's not only the giver of eternal life; he's the source of eternal life; he's the living bread. Only the eternal God can give eternal life. Look at verse 57. "*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.*"

You have to have food to live. You have to have eternal food to have eternal life. So in order to have eternal life we must believe that Jesus is the Christ, the one who provides eternal life and we must believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the one who has life in himself. But there is another reason Jesus is able to give eternal life. It's because he gave up his life. And that brings us to the third thing we must believe about Jesus.

3. BELIEVE JESUS IS THE PERFECT SACRIFICE.

The manna the Israelites ate in the wilderness didn't sustain them indefinitely. Eventually they died. It was food that perishes (like the loaves). All food except the true bread from heaven will perish. Judaism without Jesus will not lead to eternal life. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Nobody has eternal life without Jesus. Not even moralistic, therapeutic, deism will lead to eternal life. It too is food that perishes. The reason all other systems do not lead to eternal life is because no other system offers a perfect death as payment for sins. With Jesus not only is he the living God who can give life. He died for us, so that we wouldn't have to die.

Look again at verses 47- 51. "*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.*"

Jesus has been saying he is the food that endures to eternal life, that he is the bread from heaven, that he is the living bread, but not until now have we really understood what is meant by all of that. Here he says that he gives his flesh. And here he says he gives his flesh for the life of the world. What does this all mean?

Look all the way back to verse 4. Before Jesus feeds the 5,000 John the Evangelist tells us "*Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews was at hand.*" This small little editorial comment sheds a lot of light on the rest of chapter 6. It seems to be out of place and John doesn't seem to do anything with it, until now. The Passover provides meaning to verse 51. The bread of life is Jesus' flesh. It seems crass, but he is speaking in sacrificial terms! His life is given for the life of others, for the life of the world.

At the first Passover, a lamb was slaughtered and the blood of the lamb was put on the door posts (Ex 12:7). The blood was a sign. If the LORD saw the blood on a house, he passed over that house and no plague came on the firstborn son (Ex 12:13). Instead of death God's people were given life (whereas the Egyptians died). The life of the lamb was given in place of the life of the firstborn son. With Christ, the firstborn Son becomes the lamb who gives his life for the sheep.

In our sin, we all deserve eternal death. But God provides eternal life by sending his eternal son to die for our sins.

At Passover the Israelites would slaughter a lamb, roast the lamb, and then they would eat the flesh of the lamb (Ex 12:8). And they were to also eat unleavened bread. All of this was to commemorate their deliverance from slavery and God passing over them. Eating the flesh didn't save the Israelites. But eating the flesh of the Lamb each Passover after the first Passover spoke to the fact that the Israelites believed that God delivered them from death and led them out of slavery.

In verse 53 Jesus says, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”*

The Roman Catholic Church views the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, differently than we do as Evangelicals. They believe that the bread and the wine actually become the real flesh and blood of Jesus and that grace is infused into the believer who partakes of the bread and wine. The Roman Catholic Church views the Eucharist as necessary for ongoing sanctification. But it is difficult to get all of that out of these verses in John 6, if you look closely at what is meant by eating Jesus' flesh and blood.

I think in John 6 Jesus is equating eating and believing. Look at verse 54. *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

Now look at verse 40. *“For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

These two verses are essentially saying the same thing. One says, whoever *feeds* on my flesh has eternal life and will be raised. The other says, everyone who *believes* on the Son should have eternal life and be raised on the last day. John is using the metaphor of bread and eating liberally. The bread is his sacrificial death. The eating of this bread is belief in his sacrificial death. In John 6 eating is believing.

Another place we see this is in verses 47-51. These verses follow what is called a chiasmic structure which is a form of parallelism.

- A) Whoever believes has eternal life (v. 47)
- B) I am the bread of life (v. 48)
- C) Your fathers ate manna and they died (v. 49)
- C') Eat this bread from heaven, so that you do not die (v. 50)
- B') I am the living bread (v. 51a)
- A') If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. (v. 51b)

Notice everything is parallel. Notice especially A and A'. In verse 47 it says, whoever *believes* has eternal life. In verse 51 it says if anyone *eats* this bread he will live forever. Eating is believing in John 6.

Jesus has been saying from the beginning of this discourse, don't seek me for the wrong reasons, believe in me and have eternal life. Don't seek me to meet your temporary needs, believe in me and have eternal life. The whole book of John is calling us to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and that by believing we may have life in his name. John 6 calls us to do the same.

With all of this talk of eating and bread I thought it would be good for us to share a meal together this morning. We are going to share a Thanksgiving meal together.

The Lord's Supper has traditionally been called the Eucharist. We have gotten away from calling it the Eucharist in the Evangelical Church because it carries with it the Roman Catholic understanding that the bread actually becomes the flesh of Christ and the wine actually becomes the blood of Christ. We don't believe this so we stay away from words like Sacrament and Eucharist. But the word Eucharist is a good word. It means Thanksgiving (good grace literally) or in its verbal form, to give thanks. The Lord's Table has traditionally been a time to give thanks for what God has done in Christ.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. Whoever believes this good news is saved from their sin. We are thankful for many things at this time of the year and rightfully so. But the biggest reason we have to give thanks to God is for the gift of eternal life. We can come to God to meet all of our needs, but let us remember that at the heart of the Christian faith is the fact that in Christ God has met our biggest need of all, forgiveness of sin and deliverance from eternal death. This is the center of the Christian faith. And nothing illustrates this more than the Lord's Supper. Let's come with thanksgiving to the table this morning.

Father, we are thankful for the bread and cup. We pray that these elements will provide more than physical nourishment. Grant us the peace, unity and spiritual nourishment this bread symbolizes. May this cup speak again of the blood Christ shed for the forgiveness of sin. Cleanse us and consecrate us again as we partake of this meal together. We eagerly await the day we shall eat it with you in the Kingdom of Heaven. In Christ's name, Amen.⁴

Benediction

Jude 24-25 (ESV)

Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

⁴ Lee Eclov. *EFCA Pastor's Service Manual*.

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