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THE VAMPIRE DISCOURSE

John 6:41-71

Laurie is a beautiful person who is a source of continual joy for me. One aspect of that is how often she laughs, and how much she laughs at herself. She has a sometimes unique way of saying things. We have a number of expressions that are sprinkled through our conversation together that have been coined by Laurie. For instance, once we bought me a pair of lounging pants that are super comfortable. Laurie thought they seemed great and wished they had some for women, but they didn’t. She solved that by buying a pair of the smallest size for herself. She called them her Man Pants. That became our term for both hers and mine. We use her terms because they are so apt, though unique. Laurie has a flair for saying things in an unexpected way. A recent example of this happened when we had been through a truly tiring stretch of life. One Sunday afternoon Laurie was so spent she could barely function. I mentioned to Laurie that she had seemed as exhausted as I have ever seen her. She said, “Yeah, I had to push to get through church, but in the afternoon the wall just hit me.” I knew when she said it that it didn’t sound quite right, but it took me a few seconds to identify what was off about it. I said, “Uh, do you mean you hit the wall?” She started laughing at that point, and she laughed very hard. That’s become an expression between us since then. But the funny thing is, what she said probably expressed what she actually felt. It was more than just running out of gas. It felt like she’d been hit by something.

Jesus was a master communicator and had a way of saying things that were vivid and memorable. Our culture is replete with expressions that came from him, such as, born again, pearls before swine, the eleventh hour, the blind leading the blind, turn the other cheek, and many more. He also employed verbal shock and awe, saying things in a way that would get attention or force people out of familiar patterns of thinking. Wesley loves to play wake up. Jesus knew that we humans need to be awakened, jarred out of our slumber, and he used shocking expressions to do it. At times he used that ability in ways that caused his followers some heartburn, but it made a powerful point. There is no better example of that than the passage we are going to look at today in John 6:41-71. We don’t want to sleep walk through life, so let’s pay attention as Jesus says wake up!

JESUS MADE A PROVOCATIVE CLAIM

These are quite possibly some of the strangest words Jesus ever spoke. It is a passage that makes me, even after many years of studying this book and teaching the passage, more than a little uneasy. It is an uncomfortable speech, to say the least. But as was always the case with Jesus, there was a good reason for the things he said in this unusual speech.

The previous day Jesus had miraculously produced enough food to feed a crowd of thousands of people. He didn’t just give them a bite to eat. They all had as much as they wanted to eat. This may have been an early example of the old “all you can eat” restaurant. This was an awesome and popular miracle. I guess you could say the people ate it up both literally and metaphorically. Many of the ancient rabbis of that time taught that Messiah would do a miracle like the manna in the wilderness. This sure looked like that, and the people were eager for an encore to that miracle.

In the passage we looked at last week, the one prior to this passage, Jesus had taken the people to task because all they cared about was getting food. That was as high as their aspirations went. Jesus told them they were aiming too low. He said what they really needed and ought to be thinking about, was a very different kind of bread. It was a bread, he said in verse 35, that would make it so they would never be hungry again. He said in verse 33 it was bread that gives life to the world.

In verse 27 Jesus said a crucial thing that comes up again in verse 40. It was something I suspect some in his audience would have missed. He said they should not work for food that spoils, but for the food that endures to eternal life. They might have mistaken him to mean that the food doesn’t spoil but lasts forever. Of course, he wasn’t talking about eternal food, but about eternal life. He was telling them that there is a far bigger, far more important matter than having enough to eat. It is having the hope of eternal life.

This issue has implications even for our lives right now. By definition, eternal life is unending life. When one gets eternal life it doesn’t start at some point in the future. It begins now and never ends, meaning it actually involves a different quality of life beginning immediately as well as a limitless quantity of life.

Jesus made the claim that he is the bread of life. He is the bread that gives this eternal life. He is what people most need. I did a little study on the Greek word for “bread” that is used in this passage. It is the normal word for bread, but it also had a more general sense. Bread was a crucial component of the diet back then, so at times this word simply meant “food.” I found it interesting that the word meant white bread as opposed to barley bread. So Jesus said he was the white bread that gives life, and obviously he did signs and wonders. So I concluded that meant he was the Wonder Bread of life. He does way more than build strong bodies 12 ways. And if you remember that motto, you’re old.

Claiming to be the bread of life is astounding. Bread, symbolizing food, is what gives us what we need for life. One of the side effects of the treatments I have been receiving has been loss of appetite. I’m never hungry. The drugs can also cause some nausea. At times the thought of eating almost made me feel sick. I had to force myself to eat, and that’s hard to do. At the low point I lost 10 pounds in a couple of weeks. I weighed less than I did when I was in high school, and it was going down. At that point I thought I was looking at another year of this, and It didn’t seem sustainable. If I couldn’t eat, I was not going to survive. Fortunately that’s gotten better.

My point is that for us to live and thrive, we have to have food. Jesus claimed that he was that element that is essential for us to live, to thrive now and to live eternally. He claimed he was the bread, the life giving element, that was God given, come down from heaven to bring us life. This was incendiary in his culture for two reasons. The first was Jesus was essentially replacing the heart of the Jewish religion, the Old Testament Law, with himself. Leviticus 18:5 quotes God saying, “Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them.” Proverbs 7:2 says, “Keep my commands and you will live.” Psalm 1:2-3 speaks of the person “whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.” Those verses say that the key to life, to having a fruitful life “whose leaf does not wither,” is delighting in God’s Law. Jesus was claiming that he is the bread that gives life.

The second reason this claim of Jesus’ was controversial shows up in verse 42. “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?” Many of them had seen him grow up. He was just another boy who had grown up among them, another human being, and now he was claiming that he came down from heaven. The idea was absurd.

I have no problem understanding why they would have difficulty swallowing Jesus’ claims. I suspect that Jesus was a remarkable child who grew up to be a remarkable young man. But to his community it appeared there was nothing miraculous about him. He was much like the other children that grew up in their town. In verse 51 Jesus said, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever.” That is simply an outrageous claim, and for many of Jesus’ contemporaries it was way more than a bridge too far. It was heretical and insane.

JESUS MADE STATEMENTS THAT WERE OFFENSIVE

The statement in verse 51 that “whoever eats this bread will live forever,” provided Jesus’ opponents ammunition to use against him. They object, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat.” Jesus was obviously speaking metaphorically. He was not literally saying he was a loaf of bread that someone could eat. But the opponents are looking for anything they can use against him. So they took his words literally, even though they surely knew Jesus didn’t intend them that way.

In response Jesus upped the ante. He said, “I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” Well that’s just gross. Eat his flesh and drink his blood? This sounds like something out of a vampire movie. Jesus sounds like he wants followers who believe they get life by drinking the blood of people. The only problem is they have to stay out of the sunlight. Or even worse, it sounds like he was saying we have to become cannibals. Why was the cannibal so angry? He was fed up with people. What is a cannibal’s favorite fast food restaurant? Five Guys.

This was a statement that was absolutely going to offend many of Jesus’ listeners. They would have found those words horrifying. However, he obviously was not being literal. It doesn’t take too much thinking to understand Jesus’ real intent in these words. I got my undergraduate degree in math. I sometimes think I must have lost my mind when I did that. There are many easier ways to get a bachelor’s degree than taking 2 years of Calculus classes, Probability and Statistics, Numerical Analysis, theoretical math classes like Abstract Algebra and all the rest. There has been precious little that I studied that has been useful in ministry.

However, I console myself that while there certainly has been little or nothing from Calculus that applies directly to ministry, not all of my college work was wasted. Studying math helped me in a couple of ways by teaching me how to solve problems and by training me to rigorously think in logical fashion. These things have been helpful in interpreting Scripture and presenting the truth in coherent fashion.

There have also been a few times when something I learned in math applies directly to the Scriptures. This passage is one of those rare occasions. There is a principle in math and logic called the transitive law that is important here. That law says if a=b, and b=c, then a=c. For instance, if 5 times 2 is equal to 10, and 6 plus 4 is equal to 10, then 5 times 2 is equal to 6 plus 4.

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What does that have to do with this passage? Look at verse 40. Let’s have the phrase “Everyone looks to the Son and believes in him” be “a” in our equation. Then “Shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” is “b.” Then mathematically looking to the Son and believing in him is equal to having eternal life and being raised up on the last day. That’s a=b.

Now look at verse 54. Let’s have the phrase “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood” be “c” in our equation. Then “has eternal life and I will raise them up at the last day” is “b” once again. So eating flesh and drinking blood is equal to having eternal life and being raise up at the last day is c=b. The transitive law says if a=b and b=c, then a=c. That means that believing in Jesus equals eating his flesh and drinking his blood. They mean the same thing. In other words, to eat his flesh and drink his blood is merely to believe in him.

The whole point of this discussion is that what Jesus was telling people is that they needed to believe in him completely, to depend on him for eternal life as completely as they depend on food to sustain life physically right now. This would have been obvious to anyone paying attention to Jesus’ theme in this entire speech. Back in verse 29 Jesus had said, “The work of God is this, to believe in the one he has sent. Verse 35 said, “Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Verse 40 said, “My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.” Verse 47 said, “The one who believes has eternal life.” Throughout the passage the theme had been believing in Jesus. All they had to do was listen to what he was saying and they would have understood the eating and drinking was about believing.

JESUS MADE HIMSELF A FORK IN THE ROAD

The final 12 verses of this chapter tell us how people responded to this unusual speech. The religious leaders’ reaction was a foregone conclusion. They had already decided against Jesus before he opened his mouth that day. But there were others who quit following Jesus after this. Verse 60 says, “On hearing it, many of his disciples said, ‘This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?’

Verse 66 tells us, “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.” These were disciples of Jesus, people who had been following him. But after this point they decided they wanted nothing more to do with Jesus. This is amazing to me. They’d seen him heal people. They’d seen him miraculously feed thousands. But they were so offended by what he said here they walked away.

This speech was like a fork in the road. People could follow Jesus and think of him as a powerful teacher, a great prophet in the class of Moses or Elijah. But in this speech Jesus drew a line in the sand. Moses never claimed to be the bread of life. Neither did Elijah. Jesus was claiming he was much more than a human being whom God gave amazing powers. He claimed to be from heaven, and claimed that believing in him was the determining factor in both what one experienced in life on earth and in one’s eternal destiny. He did it in the most objectionable terms.

In both verse 60 and verse 66 John tells us that not a few, but many of his followers could not accept this and turned away. Jesus turned to his closest followers, his chosen 12 and asked them, “You do not want to leave, do you?” In the English Standard translation it puts that question, “Do you want to go away as well?” I think that’s closer to the way Jesus asked the question.

The good news is Peter, as he often did, spoke up for the group and said, in verses 68-69, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” Notice what Peter did not say. He didn’t say, “Why would we leave? You explain everything so clearly.” I suspect this speech was unsettling for them. I imagine they wished Jesus had said it differently. But they knew the heart of the matter. Jesus is Lord. He is the Holyne of God. He is the bread of life, the giver of life. There was no other person of whom that was true. No, they didn’t get it all. But what they got was enough that they would never bail on him.

Jesus forced people to make a decision about him. He did it deliberately. Many decided to take a different road after this, to not go down the Jesus road. But his true disciples stuck with him, even when it was confusing or difficult.

APPLICATION

Where does this passage intersect with our lives? How do we respond to it?

REST AND REJOICE IN THE WORK OF GOD

There is an important question that is answered in this section of John. The question is, why do you believe in Jesus as Lord when so many people do not? The majority of people in the world are not believers in Jesus. The majority of people in my neighborhood are not believers in Jesus. Why are you

Some people might look at me and say, “You believe because you were raised in a Christian home. You were kind of programmed by your parents to believe in Jesus.” I certainly would say that my Christian parents had a huge part in me having faith in Jesus. But I would also say that is not the ultimate reason.

I would submit as evidence that I have known quite a few people who were raised by Christian parents, yet who are not believers in Jesus. One might say that maybe my parents were just better at it than others. I could believe that because they were wonderful parents, but I have also known people whose parents were also terrific parents, but their children stepped away from the faith nonetheless. I also know many, many people who were not raised in Christian families, who still believe. This would suggest that while having Christian parents is a huge positive, it is not the sole determining factor in whether one believes in Jesus.

Another person might say that maybe you believe because you’re just not very smart. If you were smarter you’d see that it makes no sense to believe what you believe. When I was young I got to meet a man that was quite impressive. He was born in Germany, survived World War 2 and lived under the Russian occupation. He was able to escape the communist regime and ended up in this country. His name was Gerhard Dirks. He is known as the father of the modern computer. He owned 140 patents pertaining to computer technology. He had an IQ of 208. That’s actually an estimate because to be certain you’d have to be smarter than him to measure it. My point here is this man was brilliant. In his younger years he was an atheist. But he came to a place where he realized that the existence of God is undeniable, and he eventually came to faith in Jesus. He was not a person who believed because he wasn’t very smart. He was the smartest man in the room in every room he entered.

Some people might say that maybe I believe in Jesus because I’m more gullible or superstitious than others. But I would submit for your consideration Francis Collins, the eminent scientist. He is a geneticist who led the Human Genome Project and led the National Institutes for Health. He was the very definition of a scientist and was not the least bit given to superstition. Yet he is a believer in Jesus Christ. Or consider Lee Strobel, who was a confirmed atheist. But his wife came to faith in Jesus and challenged him to consider the evidence. He set out to prove to her that faith in Jesus made no sense, but ended up a believer in Jesus.

Why then do some people believe in Jesus when others do not? Is it because they are somehow more spiritual than others, or maybe smarter than others? No. Jesus tells us twice in these verses. In verse 44 he said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” In verse 65 he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.” If you believe in Jesus, it is because God has worked in your life to bring you to believe in him and made you able to do so.

This is consistent with Ephesians 2:1 where Paul told the Christians in Ephesus that previously, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins.” In verse 3 he said that all of us were in the same condition. He claims people are spiritually dead in their natural state. The question is, how much can dead people do? They can’t do anything. That’s what it means to be dead. No longer operating. Paul says we all start out that way, unable to do anything about our spiritual situation. In verses 4-5 Paul wrote, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.” The only way dead people come to believe in Jesus is God makes them alive.

This raises a number of difficult questions. I don’t have time to address them today, which is good, because in the end, my answers to them mostly are, “Um, I don’t know. Only God knows that.” We are not asked to understand everything. We are asked by God to do what the disciples did and say, “Who else could we go to? You have the words of eternal life.” We are to trust, even when we don’t always understand everything.

This has some big implications for us. We don’t believe and have life because of who we are or what we have done. We believe because God worked in us. Because he made us alive in Jesus and drew us to him. That’s it. If God didn’t do that, we’re as dead as a rock. So first that means that we should live with enormous gratitude. Our gratitude for what God has done for us drives everything in the Christian life. It should also humble us, for we deserve nothing. Without God’s work, we’re dead. We could not fix that. Only he can. Finally, we should feel secure, because what is going on in our lives is God’s work. Philippians 1:6 says God began the work in us, and he will finish it. So we need not fret or fear. Regardless of our flaws and failings, God’s work will be complete.

KEEP EATING

We need to keep firmly planted in our minds that Jesus is still the bread of life. That is as true today as it was the day he uttered these words. He is the one who gives eternal life. That life has a quality. We can and should begin experiencing elements of that life even now. The way we do that is by eating the bread of life, continuing to believe in him.

I know you’ve all had this experience. Maybe it’s a Thanksgiving. I love our Thanksgiving food. I always eat too much. I find myself having eaten so much it hurts. I recall a few years ago when our son, Toby, did it again on Thanksgiving. He put himself over the top when he insisted on having a piece of each of the pies available for dessert. We had apple pie, pumpkin pie and chocolate pie. He had some of each. I remember him lying on the couch and moaning that he was in pain. He said, “I’m never going to eat again.” You know what he did when he got up the next morning? He had breakfast, because he was hungry.

There is never a moment in our lives when we have eaten enough that we will never have to eat again. The same is true of us spiritually. We’ve never had enough of the bread of life that we will never need any more. We need to return to him, believing in him, trusting in him, walking with him every day of our lives.

LIVE OUT THE COMMITMENT

This last point comes from an obvious question that this passage raises. The question is, why did Jesus say the things he did? He made the point several times that the key to eternal life, to experiencing true life, is believing in him. That was controversial enough on its own. The point was quite clear. Why did he then add on that business about eating his flesh and drinking his blood? He knew that would be offensive to his audience. The image is offensive to us. It was worse for them. He handed ammo to his opponents and clearly turned off many who were on the fence and even many who had been believing in him. It was no surprise that this would happen. He did it deliberately.

Consider the thinking of the people who were following him. Earlier in this chapter after Jesus fed that massive crowd, verse 15 tells us, “Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” I don’t know how you force someone to be your king, but they were going to try. Why? Because they thought he was going to be what they wanted in a King and a Messiah. He was going to defeat Rome, rule the world from Jerusalem, and usher in an era of unprecedented power and wealth, an era where they would be given free food. They’d have all they wanted without having to do anything to work for it. This was their dream. They wanted to have a great life in this world, and that’s all they were thinking about.

Jesus said the things he did here because he wanted to draw a line in the sand. He wasn’t interested in having followers who were in it because they wanted the good times to roll and Jesus was going to do it for them. He was working toward a totally different end, and because of that, for his followers the hard times were going to roll. This was a challenge to wannabe followers. Are you willing to keep following when it is hard, when you don’t understand, when you’re not getting what you want in this world? Because that time is going to come for anyone who chooses to follow Jesus. This speech is Jesus throwing down the gauntlet. Are you willing to keep following when it is hard and makes no sense?

This speaks to one of the big issues in the global church today. There are millions of people who believe in Jesus thinking that he wants them to be healthy and wealthy, to have success and the best possible life on earth. What they want is rather like what the masses following Jesus wanted. The focus is on this life and having it good right now. Jesus made this speech because he wanted people to understand that was not what he is going to give his followers. He’s going to give them life, eternal life, real life inside them, but not pleasant circumstances necessarily. He wanted his followers to have his life inside them, something that would be there regardless of what their circumstances are. He wanted them to care about the kingdom of God, not just their own personal kingdom in this world. He wants followers who are committed to him regardless of how life goes.

The challenge for us is, are we willing to accept what he offers? Are we willing to be committed to him, to follow him, to live for his kingdom when life is not going the way we might prefer? Are we willing to say with his disciples, “To whom else can we go that has the words of eternal life?” Are we willing to stick with him even when he says things that mystify us and maybe even upset us?

It turns out that having that kind of commitment to his kingdom is an essential component to true life. Pete Davis has written a book titled *Dedicated: The Case For Commitment In An Age Of Infinite Browsing.* In it he wrote, “Freedom isn’t sufficient for a fulfilling life. The car lets us go anywhere and the internet lets us see anything, but happiness has not come automatically.” He said we have more freedom than people have ever had, but that freedom hasn’t provided a cure for the maladies of our world. He wrote, “Liberation is only half of the story of who we are. The other half is dedication. People want to be free, but we want to be free to then do something.” In other words, freedom is wonderful, but not enough. To be truly full our lives must be lived for a purpose, a cause that is bigger than ourselves. It is in answering Jesus’ call to live for his kingdom no matter what may come we find true life.

In 1992 a woman named Gloria Davey was walking with friends in the English countryside near her home. They came across the ruins of a church that had been destroyed by bombing in the war The remains of the church had been desecrated with satanic symbols. She told her husband, Bob, about it when she got home. He was a leader in the local church. He went to see the ruins and was horrified by what he saw. The church was St. Mary’s church. He determined at that point that he would dedicate himself to restoring the church. He began working that afternoon clearing out the rubbish. For the next 22 years he was at the site every day except for family events. He faced some resistance. Satanists threatened to kill him if he continued, but he was undeterred. He said, “I haven’t had a holiday in 22 years, but I haven’t wanted one. Who wants to retire? My advice to others: don’t play golf or buy a Spanish villa when you retire. Fine yourself a church to save.” His life was full until he died at the age of 91 in 2021. He found life through his commitment.

There is a one time commitment we make when we put our faith in Jesus. But as is true of most commitments, it has to be renewed every day. On August 24, 1979 I made a commitment to love Laurie for the rest of my life. That commitment has been the most joyful factor in my life. But that commitment has to be renewed every day. Laurie loves dishes with shrimp. Sadly, she has had some unfortunate episodes with shrimp. The most recent happened two weeks ago when she once again got food poisoning from a shrimp taco. That day the lively, joyful woman I have enjoyed for so long was noticeably absent. In her place was a poor, suffering woman. When she was calling dinosaurs in the bathroom she needed me to love her. I needed to renew my commitment to love her, whatever it takes, that day.

Jesus calls on us to commit to him, to follow him even when we don’t understand, even when it is hard. We make that commitment when we put our faith in him, but that is a commitment we need to renew eversingle day of our lives.

Michael Nnadi, age 18, was a student at a seminary in Nigeria, studying to become a pastor. He was known as exuding almost supernatural joy. On January 8, 2020, an armed gang dressed in military fatigues broke into the school. They took 4 hostages, all students at the school, and fled. By the end of the month 3 of the hostages were freed, but not Michael. A few days later his dead body was found after it had been dumped on the side of the road. His twin brother, Raphael, said, “Michael was so committed and love the things of God…My consolation is that he did not die in vain, pursuing the things of the world, but rather he died in the service to God.” The mystery was why the gang killed just one of the students. The answer eventually came when the man who killed Michael was arrested and was interviewed in prison by a newspaper on April 30, 2020. His name was Mustapha Mohammed, and he openly said, “He did not allow me any peace; he just kept preaching to me his gospel. I did not like the confidence he displayed in his faith, and I decided to send him to an early grave.” Michael did not waver from his commitment to Jesus.

We likely will not face a dire situation like that. But every day we will be faced with the question of whether we will trust Jesus and live for his kingdom, or live for our own kingdom.