

Bring It to the Table
[John 6:51-58](#)
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Today is our third Sunday in the study of the third chapter of the book of John. The primary speaker in this chapter is Jesus himself, and as the chapter goes on, the people start to realize that Jesus is more and more unusual than they had thought he was.

At first, he seemed like a great healer, who would go from town to town and relieve people of their wounds and plagues. Then, they realized that he was also a great teacher, who was willing to speak to the people for hours out by the sea. After that, they realized that Jesus was able to give them food, because he fed thousands of them together after he had been teaching.

This is where chapter six of John begins, with Jesus reaching his highest approval rating. In fact, after he fed the people, the people wanted to make him king, so he had to slip away and escape from them. It was when he came back the next day that he began to teach them about the meaning of those healings and those miracles...

...and that's when it started to get weird. When people gathered to hear him speak again, the first thing he said to them was, "You aren't coming to hear me, you're coming because you think I'm going to give you another meal." Not long after that, he tells them, "you've seen me and you've seen what I've done, but still you don't believe." Meanwhile, he tells them that he is bread that has come down from heaven, so that they may eat it and have eternal life.

And the people thought, "well, eternal life, that's good, but what is this business about Jesus coming down from Heaven?" This was not the kind of thing that people were supposed to say, and it wasn't the kind of thing that people were supposed to teach. In fact, it was blasphemy, if not against the king and the Romans, then certainly against God.

But instead of explaining himself, Jesus doubles down and repeats, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever." And then, just when people are really uncomfortable with what he is saying, he tells them, "This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

This really threw the people off, and again, instead of going into a technical explanation, Jesus doubles down on the message:

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh

and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven.”

With this, Jesus became perhaps the strangest, and perhaps the most uncomfortable, teacher in all of the Jewish faith. Right after this, as we will see next week, most of the people who had been following Jesus decided to leave. At first they had flocked to him because he was healing and teaching and feeding them, but now he had just gotten weird.

Jesus was kind of like the celebrity who makes a hit movie or a hit song, and gets really popular and gets put on stage, and then they have another hit and it's even bigger. But then they start to get interviewed and make speeches and it turns out that they have some really off-putting opinions. Suddenly their popularity plummets. Then, when they get asked about it, they complain that people should love them for their art.

But Jesus had the opposite message: “Don't follow me for what I'm doing; follow me for who I am.” Jesus also knew full well that only a few would keep following him, and that's why he didn't take pains to explain these things that he was saying. He didn't go out of his way to accommodate those who were uncomfortable, because if people were going to truly believe and truly follow him, then they had to be doing it for the right reason.

Jesus's success was not in numbers of followers or in making as many people as possible happy; it was in speaking the truth and leading those who were willing to listen.

So that is why we have the kind of language that we have in today's passage. Jesus tells the people that they would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and he uses very graphic words. For example, he doesn't just say “eat,” he uses a word that means, “grind and crunch.” This kind of talk turned most people away, but for a few, it caused them to draw closer. They might not have understood what Jesus meant, but they realized that they needed to get closer to him to find out.

Their stomachs might have been churning, and they might have even gotten lumps in their throats, but they managed to swallow them and keep listening and keep following.

After all, they might have recognized that Jesus was not just giving them some philosophical help; he was giving them the language of worship. He was giving them the language of complete fellowship with God. Only, he was giving it to them in a way they had never heard.

You see, the way that people worshiped back then— not just in the Jewish faith but in most ancient religions— was based on sacrifice. Even going back long before Jesus, making a sacrifice was central to the act of worship. In pretty much every ancient

religion, people would sacrifice animals to their gods. They would kill the animals, and then they would cook them. In fact, the word for sacrifice in the ancient Hebrew language literally meant, “to cause to go up.”

After all, what happens when you cook something? Smoke goes up in the air. When you’re cooking meat, how does that smoke smell? It smells great! So when people were cooking the animals that they had sacrificed, the awesome-smelling smoke would go up in the air...to the gods.

Plus, what parts of the animal melted and burnt away first? Well, the flesh and the fat. So, by people’s reasoning, those were the best parts— the ones that were going up to the gods. Then, after the sacrificed meat was cooked, the people would eat the meat as if they were eating the same meal that the gods were eating. In other words, they were having communion with the gods. The sacrifices and the feasts were opportunities for all of the people to gather and to have communion together with the gods.

When God— the one true God— revealed Himself to the people of Israel, He instructed them to maintain these kinds of practices, to make offerings and have feasts together in communion with Him. At these feasts, the people gnawed on the flesh of the animals and drank the wine from the vineyards.

Sometimes, the purpose of the sacrifices was to give thanks and celebrate, and other times, the purpose was to ask God for forgiveness— to make atonement for the sins of the people. When the animal was sacrificed and offered up to God, God would give forgiveness, and when the people and God ate together, the relationships that had been strained by the people’s sins and shortcomings were restored in the presence of God.

At least...that’s how it was supposed to work. As you read through the Old Testament, you discover that the Israelites didn’t always do the best job of making sacrifices and having feasts. Over and over, God sent prophets to them to tell them this, but over and over again, they kept messing up. But it is interesting to look at God’s complaints against the Israelites during those times.

In the book of Amos, God even tells them, “I hate, I despise your festivals,” and listen to what God says in the Book of Malachi:

“A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the Lord Almighty.

“It is you priests who show contempt for my name.

“But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’

“By offering defiled food on my altar.

“But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’

“By saying that the Lord’s table is contemptible. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.

“Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?”—says the Lord Almighty.

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord Almighty, “and I will accept no offering from your hands. My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the Lord Almighty.

“But you profane it by saying, ‘The Lord’s table is defiled,’ and, ‘Its food is contemptible.’ And you say, ‘What a burden!’ and you sniff at it contemptuously,” says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 1:6-13a)

In that passage, God is complaining about the poor sacrifices that the Israelites were bringing to the Temple. On the surface, we could just read that passage and say that God was upset because people weren’t bringing their best animals to Him...

...and that is true. At the Temple, an entire cottage industry had grown up by which people would sell small animals— especially doves or pigeons— so that people could swing by the Temple, buy a pigeon, give it to the priest, and the priest could sacrifice it on their behalf. Boom, their sins were forgiven, and they could check that off their to-do list.

Then, the people who had animals would just send their lame animals or their weak animals to be sacrificed by the priests. After all, a blind cow and a regular cow smell the same when they’re burning, so what’s God going to care?

Well, God does care...and not just for the reason we might think. Sure, God complains about the lack of quality sacrifices, but not because He wants the good meat. God complains about the low quality sacrifices because they are halfhearted. If people are just swinging by the Temple and buying a couple of pigeons to give to the priests, are they really seeking communion with God and with one another...or are they just checking off a box on their to-do lists?

And if people are providing weak animals to be sacrificed in the temple, are they really

offering something for the sake of communion with God, or are they just following rules about giving to the Temple?

Did you notice in that passage from Malachi that I just read, that God talks about people coming to the table and turning up their noses? Maybe the people were offering up animals for their sins, but what good was it if they didn't want to have communion and restoration with one another? The point wasn't just the sacrifice; it was the communion with God and with one another.

So if people were giving food that others didn't want to eat, or if people didn't want to actually sit at the table with other people, then it showed that their hearts were not where they were supposed to be: on the healing and restoration that God gives. If the people wanted God to act in their lives, they were willing to check off the right religious boxes, but they weren't willing to bring it to the table.

They weren't willing to invest in person. Now the problem, of course, is that without that table fellowship, there is distance between people and God and distance between people and one another. It's just like with our families and our friends. When a family is able to sit down together for a meal, it's an important time. If it's a busy night and everyone eats on their own, yeah, they've gotten their food, but have they really been together? Have relationships really been strengthened?

They may have done what had to be done, but were they really present?

By the time Jesus came to them, the people had had this distant understanding of worship and fellowship. They still gathered for feast days, but they were formalities. In fact, there was even a time when Jesus got mad and turned over all of the merchant tables in the Temple. But what Jesus was beginning to reveal in this passage was that he was not only sent from God, but he was going to be the sacrifice for our eternal communion with God. Jesus was telling the people that God had provided the sacrifice, and God had provided the meal, and each of those was Jesus.

But unless people were willing to try and understand what that would mean, they wouldn't know what God was doing. Unless they were willing to put aside their discomfort and preconceptions— unless they were willing to put aside themselves and open themselves up to what God was doing— then they wouldn't be able to share in that communion...

...not because God was withholding it from them, but because they were not approaching it wholeheartedly. They were turning up their noses at the sacrifice that God was offering.

We may not always understand what God is trying to tell us, but our response should

always be to draw closer and see what He is really offering. God offers us the sacrifice of Jesus so that we may grow in understanding of who He is and what He has done for us...not simply so that He can be pleased and we can be changed, but so that we can be restored.

God wants to be in relationship with us so much that He made the sacrifice and brought the meal. At this thought, some people questioned Jesus and some turned away; but those who were willing to go deeper would understand just what God had in store and just what God wanted:

His presence and our presence together at the table, where we are open and willing to see what He does when we give our best to Him.