

"Jesus' Hardest Words"
John 6:51-59

What possible meaning and impact could these difficult and jarring words, spoken by Jesus to skeptical, oppositional Jews, have for us today, almost 2,000 years after this incident? Surprisingly, Jesus' words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood have had a major impact in history and in believers' lives!

Key Point – while these words of Jesus are certainly difficult, they are important words, and can be a great blessing and encouragement to us as we seek to grow in our relationship with Him.

The significance of Jesus' words here in history is confirmed by the fact that conflicting interpretations of "eat my flesh" and "drink my blood" and how they're applied to the Lord's Last Supper led to different denominations. The question here is this: how is Christ present at the Table? Roman Catholics (and to a lesser extent Lutherans) believe that Jesus' words here are to be taken literally, that Jesus is literally and physically present in the sacrament. When the bread and juice are consecrated by the priest or pastor, those elements are literally transformed into the real body and blood of Jesus. The position of those who are reformed or Presbyterian is that Jesus is present in this sacrament, but His presence is not a literal, physical one. It is spiritual. The physical elements of bread and juice point us to the spiritual presence. As our physical body receives nourishment from the physical (seen) elements that are the bread and contents of the cup, we understand that our spirit, our inner being receives nourishment from the spiritual (unseen) ministry of Jesus Christ, spiritually present and working at this Table. As an aside, Baptists have an entirely different view. They have traditionally believed that Christ is not at all present at the Table. As they participate in this sacrament their focus is on remembering, remembering Jesus Christ and what He has done.

As a Presbyterian and Reformed church, we affirm that Jesus is speaking here in a real, but spiritual way. Understood this way, "eating" and "drinking" is the climax/culmination of what Jesus has been saying all along in this encounter. He has said repeatedly that men, women, boys, and girls must "believe" in Him (vv. 29, 35, 47). They must "come" to Him (v. 35). These terms – believe and come refer to what we would most naturally call faith. The last terms "eating and drinking" stress that the commitment that is involved in faith. When you eat or drink, the food or beverage you consume has a real and productive impact on your life (if of course, that food and drink are good for you). Is Jesus Christ as real and productive to you in the same way? Is He as much a part of you as what you eat and drink? Faith is certainly committing yourself to Him, but it is also taking Him into your life, into your being. I know we're talking about something that is intensely spiritual in nature here. I struggled all week with this, realizing how superficial so much of our daily lives are. Jesus is talking about "the deep," what's going on deep in our hearts, our minds, our souls. He's saying faith in Him means welcoming Him in here. I've adapted an illustration originally used by William Barclay that I hope will be helpful. On your bookshelf there is a book that you have never read. Let's say it's John Grisham's book, The Broker. As long as that book remains unread it is external to you. One day, you take it down and read it. You're thrilled and fascinated. Maybe you've been to Italy, and you are able to put yourself in Bologna, which is where most of the action takes place. The story sticks to you, the important words and incidents remain in your memory. Now that you've read the book, when you want to, you can take those words and incidents from your memory, from inside yourself and think about them and feed your mind and heart on them. At one time the book was outside of you. Now it is inside of you and you can feed on it. It is that way with any great experience in life. It remains

external until you take it into yourself. It is just this way with Jesus. As long as He remains a figure in a book, He is external to you. But when He enters your hearts, you can feed upon the life and strength and the dynamic vitality that He gives to you. To eat and to drink, Jesus says, is to take His life into the very center of your life, your being.

God has not left us in the dark as to what it means to eat and to drink, to feed on Jesus in our inner being. Our third point addresses some of the most prominent helps. First and foremost, there's God's Word. It's the primary means which you and I can feed on Jesus Christ. As you read and reflect on the Word, God will bring you into contact with Jesus Christ. He will use it to bring to mind what you most need to know. He will reveal sin in you and correct it, and He will most certainly lead you in the way you should go. Another help is prayer. E.M. Bounds wrote that the most important thing about prayer is not the results it gets, but what he called "the deepening intimacy and unhurried communion with God" that we all need for our lives. Another help is what we're doing today: worship. We come into God's presence giving Him praise and thanks, we encounter Him, and in that encounter is the opportunity for Him to touch and transform our lives with His goodness, truth, and love. Another help to us is the Sacrament, where we feed spiritually upon Him Who is the "Bread of Life."

The fourth point is the impact of "feeding on Jesus." First, as your inner being grows in Jesus, you know your salvation is certain. In verse 54 Jesus says "whoever eats...and drinks...has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." Eternal life is God's life. It is life without end, lived forever in the wonder and glory of heaven. The certainty that eternal life is yours is confirmed by Jesus' commitment to raise you up at the last day, when He comes again in glory and in power (also verses 39, 40, and 47). Death is not the end. At the last day, He will raise you from the dead, He will raise you to life lived forever in the presence of your Lord and God! A second impact of "eating and drinking," of feeding on Jesus is that you enjoy life with Him. In verse 56, Jesus says, "Whoever eats...and drinks...remains in me, and I in him." This is the first mention of Jesus' promise to remain in those who remain in Him. Or, another way to put it: to live in those who live in Him. Jesus' promise is not that you simply receive this package of eternal life as you feed on Him. He promises that you receive Him, His life, His goodness, His love, His peace, His joy, His courage. You receive Him! John 15 gives the fullest description of what it means to live in Jesus. He says, "If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." That is, as you live in Christ and Christ lives in you, you will live a productive, abundant life. Jesus continues, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." A third benefit of feeding on Jesus is that you receive God's help for living this life. In verse 57 Jesus says, "The one who feeds on Me will live because of Me." Finally, the words of Jesus suggest that you receive strength for the living of this life as you feed on Him. This verse is not talking about eternal life out in the future, but the living of eternal life now. Again, eternal life is God's life. It is an awesome, almost indescribable life of peace, love, truth, joy, holiness, beauty, and power, and Jesus declares that it is your life now, as you feed on, as you grow in Him! Is that happening in you? Is the life of God becoming more prominent, more powerful, more in control in your life as the weeks, the months, the years go by? The answer to that question is "yes" if you are feeding on Jesus regularly, consistently, as you're growing in faith in Him!