

Marvel: What Did Jesus Do?

You Have the Words of Life

John 6:60-71

Mark Vroegop

“When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?’ But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, ‘Do you take offense at this? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe.’ (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) And he said, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.’ After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the twelve, ‘Do you want to go away as well?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’ Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve? And yet one of you is a devil.’ He spoke of Judas the son of Simon Iscariot, for he, one of the twelve, was going to betray him” (John 6:60–71, ESV).

There are some roles and situations in life that are so complicated and nuanced that the more you know, the less you know.

Find a person who really knows how to navigate these roles, and you’ll find someone who is humble, deferential, and honest about how much further he or she has to go. Or you’ll find someone who is ready to give advice about his or her mistakes because those are more obvious.

Let me give you a few examples.

I have no interest in reading a book from a person who says, “Marriage is simple and easy.” I don’t want to have lunch with a pastor who has an air of “I’m killin’ it with church stuff.” And on this Father’s Day, if I asked all the fathers who feel like they are exceptional dads to stand, I think the number would be small.

There are some scenarios or situations where you understand what is going on when you are overwhelmed or feel like something is really difficult. In fact, it would be a mark of immaturity or even a bit frightening when you are around someone who doesn’t “get it.”

There are some things that if you understand what is really going on, you would say, “Whew—this is hard!” In other words, the humble acknowledgment of the challenge indicates the person does, in fact, understand.

When I read the Scripture today, did you hear what the disciples said? “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” The fact that they make this statement verifies that they heard what Jesus said previously. We’ll explore this further in a moment.

But in order for you to understand this text, you need to understand that John wants us to see **our hopelessness without Jesus’s help**.

The title of today’s sermon is “You Have the Words of Life.” I could have also entitled this message “No One Else Has the Words of Life.” John records this story in order to show us a critical dividing line when it comes to following Jesus. We have to embrace the reality and joy of our hopelessness apart from Jesus.

Allow me to show you this from the text and also to make a few direct applications to fathers.

A Hard Saying

As I said before, this paragraph begins with a conflict. Verse 60 identifies a division that will take place between people who call themselves “disciples of Jesus.” We are not sure how many people the word “many” represents. However, it is clear that John desires for us to understand that Jesus has attracted a large following.

Perhaps this crowd began to follow him after it observed a few miracles. Maybe these people joined the group after they received the bread and fish in the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1-15). We are not sure. But we know there a lot of people who are following Jesus at this moment.

It’s also interesting that John uses the word “disciples” to describe this crowd. As you heard when I read the Scripture, many of them will turn back and no longer identify with Jesus. Even knowing this, John chooses to call them disciples. For now, just take note of this, and I’ll come back to it in a moment.

John leads this paragraph by identifying that after these disciples heard what Jesus said, they replied (v. 60) “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” There are a few things you need to know about this statement. First, when the text says “hard,” it doesn’t merely mean hard to understand. It also means demanding or tough. They find his words difficult—even offensive.

If you weren’t here last week, we examined the way Jesus dealt with people who were asking him questions with wrong motives. Their unbelief was getting the best of them. Jesus tries to make their unbelief clear by making a series of challenging statements:

“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out”
(John 6:37).

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44).

“So 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. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:53–54).

“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. This 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” (John 6:57–58).

As I said last week, if you know who Jesus is, and if you believe in him, you hear these statements and they make your heart want to sing. But if you follow Jesus for the wrong reasons, these words are frustrating.

In order to understand why Jesus says things like this, both here and in other places, you need to know that believing in Jesus doesn't happen unless people are able to deal with all the wrong reasons they have for following him. Let me put it this way: in order to believe in Jesus, you have to stop believing in the wrong things, especially in yourself.

Jesus says hard things here, and the Bible says other hard things elsewhere in order to help us see the barriers to belief that we create by trusting ourselves. Jesus isn't being mean. He's attempting to address the blindness of the human heart.

Think of the last time you realized that you were acting proudly. Think of a time when you were full of yourself. How did you come to that see the issue? Normally pride is exposed through pain—either a very difficult conversation or a failure of some kind. Our self-confidence blinds us. And it often takes something traumatic for us to see it. Self-trust doesn't often die without brokenness.

The hard words of Jesus are designed to break our self-confidence. It's a grace-gift when this happens.

But we learn something more in this text about the value of hard sayings. They clarify who really is a disciple. Remember that in verse 60 John refers to “disciples.” But we find them saying, “. . . who can listen to it?” when they talk about the hard words of Jesus. If you skip ahead to verse 66, you'll find that many of these disciples abandoned Jesus at this point. They refused to accept his words.

Why is this important? John identifies that not everyone who claims to be a disciple really is a disciple. The text is acknowledging that it's possible to be around Jesus, to listen to Jesus, to like some of the things Jesus says, and to love some of the things that Jesus does, but still not actually be a disciple of Jesus. People may even call you a disciple, and you get lumped into the group. However, you might not really be a disciple.

This is especially true for those of us who've had the privilege of being raised in a Christian home. There's a real danger of being near Jesus but not really knowing Jesus. Now, I have no intention of scaring you. I only want to caution you. Being a disciple means receiving everything about Jesus and submitting to him in every way.

If you're a father with a child who has walked away from the faith, don't lose hope. Be willing to pray a hard prayer—that God would mercifully bring your son or daughter to an end of him or herself. Pray that God would tear down the props of self-made trust.

Being a disciple begins with embracing the hopelessness of self-trust. Hard sayings help us see that.

A Big God

What remedy does Jesus offer these conflicted disciples? I find this fascinating. Does Jesus encourage them by telling them that what he says is not really that disturbing? Does he water down his previous words? Not in the slightest.

On the contrary, Jesus points them to the truth regarding who he is. Jesus doesn't lower the bar—he raises it!

In verse 61, we learn that Jesus knows they are grumbling. He asks them directly if they are offended by what he has said. Now I want to be careful here that you not take license and use this text as an excuse to be a spiritual bull-in-a-china-shop. But I would think most of us would approach the offense as if Jesus did something wrong. Part of the reason we likely think that way is because our culture tends to view feeling offended as a non-negotiable, always legitimate emotion. We rarely ask ourselves or others if we should be offended.

It's all a matter of perspective. Dads, when your kids are offended that you won't stop for ice-cream, what is your response? While I trust that you are gracious, I hope you are not overly-apologetic. A child should not be offended over the wise stewarding of time, money, and calories. A dad knows things children do not!

Keep this difference in mind as we look at what Jesus says. He's not talking to them as an equal. Notice what Jesus does here.

The very first thing he says is connected to who Jesus is as the Son of Man. He challenges their offense at what he said with telling them who he is. In verse 62 Jesus talks about ascending to where he was before. Many commentators believe he's referring not just to his ascension (see Acts 1:6-11), but also to what he said in John 3:14—" . . . the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

In other words, Jesus is telling them that he has the authority to say hard things because of who he is.

Second, he tells them about the difference between the Spirit and the flesh. He identifies that the source of life—the kind of change they need—only comes from the power of the Spirit of God. This sounds similar to Jesus's words to Nicodemus when he told him about being born again (see John 3:1-14). But to make it clear, Jesus says, "the flesh is no help at all."

While Jesus is elevating the truth about himself and the Spirit, he's also making it clear that trusting in anything else is pointless.

However, they are not completely without hope if they will look in the right direction. In verse 63b, Jesus says that the words he has spoken to them are spirit and life. Jesus means that the words he speaks are generated by the Spirit and that they have the potential to give life.¹

This is similar to what Jesus said in John 5:24.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5:24).

Jesus is saying the right thing, but he knows many will not believe in him (v. 64). The world is marked by a general and tragic unbelief in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God. This rejection of Jesus is not surprising to him. It only reinforces the lostness of mankind and the necessity of God’s direct intervention.

“And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father”” (John 6:65).

Yet another hard saying of Jesus! And it is difficult if you operate merely from a position of fairness from your perspective. You could think this is some fatalistic text if you viewed it merely from that lens. But if you start with the hopeless condition of man, suddenly the intervention of God is an act of sovereign love.

A big view of God and his sovereignty is comforting to those who understand the helplessness of mankind.

A Singular Hope

The effect of Jesus’s teaching, according to verse 66, is the departure of many disciples. Jesus’s words did not reconcile the issue they had with him. One commentator says, “What they wanted, he would not give; what he offered, they would not receive.”² And so, they proved that they were not true disciples. These “disciples” were not ready to receive Jesus and his words. They refused to embrace their helplessness. Many of his disciples walked away.

Apparently, not all of them left. In verse 67, Jesus turned to the twelve disciples and asked them a pointed question: “Do you want to go away as well?” What a moment this must have been!

Peter speaks up. For all the bad moments in the gospels for Peter, this is special.

“Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God”” (John 6:68–69).

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 301–302.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 64.

What a statement! There's so much here. And what's fascinating to me is that Jesus asks this question, not for his benefit, but for theirs. He knows the disciples better than they know themselves—even the state of Judas's heart. Jesus asks this question because it is good for them to answer it!

Notice what Peter affirms:

Desperation – Peter may not know everything, and he will still make some major mistakes, but he's got one thing right: there's no one else who has the words of eternal life. Peter confesses the exclusivity of Jesus. We haven't come to John 14 in our study yet, but in that chapter, Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me." I love that he says, "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

Faith – Peter directly affirms their faith in who Jesus is. While the other disciples are walking away, Peter tells Jesus that they believe and know who he is. These disciples are not leaving because they believe. They are not walking away because they are convinced.

Worship – Peter affirms that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah. He is more than just a man from Nazareth. Jesus is more than a teacher or a miracle worker. Peter expresses the message of the entire book of John—"that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31).

Peter is pinning all his hopes on Jesus. He's come to terms (at least in this moment) with the hopelessness of all other options. He places his full confidence in who Jesus is. Peter's singular hope is Jesus.

If this were a movie, the credits would start rolling. This would be a great place to end.

But as right as Peter is, Jesus doesn't leave him with a commendation. Peter shouldn't start high-fiving the rest of the disciples. Jesus is deeply concerned about the problem of unbelief and trusting in anything related to the flesh. So, our text ends with a reminder that while Peter's statement was amazing, the disciples are not fully immune from betrayal ("one of you is a devil" – v. 70b).

And Jesus reminds them how their relationship started: "Did I not choose you?" In other words, Jesus wants to reinforce that Peter's statement did not come from him alone. Peter's affirms Jesus because Jesus chose Peter.

Jesus wants to make it clear that there is no hope in any other place or person other than him. That isn't self-centered or egotistical when you are the Son of God and the sacrifice for sins. We are hopeless without Jesus's help.

Application for Fathers

I promised at the beginning to connect this text to Father's Day. So, let me draw two applications that apply directly to fathers and indirectly to the rest of us.

1. Dad, embrace your helplessness

Dads are supposed to be strong. They should be providers and stabilizers. Dads should be rescuers and humble warriors. But, Dad, I want to remind you that your strength and power are limited. Your children may think you are a superhero, but you know the truth. You may be a great man, but you also know your limits. Pride, brokenness, bitterness, insecurity, greed, lust, and anger lurk under the surface. Embrace the humility that should come with this text. You are hopeless without Jesus's help.

2. Dad, look to Jesus

It doesn't matter whether you are on top of the world or flat on your back. You need to look to Jesus for the help you need. You may not yet be a Christian, and the hopelessness of your life is starting to wake you up to the condition of your soul. You may have known Christ for 50 years, but you still need Jesus. Remind your heart: "To whom shall we go? Jesus has the words of life!"

John 6 is a hard text. It is loaded with mystery, tension, and unanswered questions. This chapter reminds us that God is bigger than we often consider.

It reminds us that we are hopeless without Jesus.

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