

Feeding on the Son
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John 6.53-61
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Did you know that the Gospel is offensive? Yes, *inescapably* offensive. In one way or another, the Gospel will tick us all off. And what's wild, as Tim Keller points out, is that the Gospel's offensiveness is not limited to a particular culture or a particular time. The Gospel is an equal-opportunity offender. No matter who you are, or where you're from, it will offend you in some way.

So for example, here in the West people are often offended by the Gospel's 'intolerant' morality. '*I just can't believe God would judge loving, consenting adults.*' However, if you go to the Middle East, you'll find that people are offended for the opposite reason—the gospel's free grace. '*I just can't believe that God would let people off the hook so easily. There's no justice in that.*' Some are offended because the gospel is too harsh, others because it's too soft.

And of course the universal offense of the gospel makes perfect sense if God is holy and we are sinful. Inevitably, God's truth will rub our sinful hearts the wrong way.

Indeed, the fact that we're occasionally offended is actually a healthy sign—indicating that the God we follow is a real-live God, and not simply a 'Stepford God' of own making...like the Stepford Wives in that bizarre movie (Keller).

And so today we're going to look at 5 common ways the gospel offends. So that we can better know what to do with any offense. We're going to look at what the gospel says about...

1. Exclusivity
2. Physicality
3. Intimacy
4. Dependency
5. Mortality

So let's dive in. John 6 is one of the most offensive chapters in the Bible. It begins innocuously enough with Jesus feeding the 5,000 and the crowds get excited and try to make him king. But by the end of the chapter Jesus is abandoned by most of his followers. And so he asks the disciples in verse 61, '*Do you take offense at [my teaching]?*'

So what is it that makes Jesus so offensive?

First, Jesus is exclusive. Verse 53. He 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.*' Basically Jesus says, without me you're dead! There's no life without me. Not all paths lead to God—those other paths are dead ends, literally.

We also see the exclusivity in how Jesus calls himself the 'Son of Man,' a reference to the prophet Daniel, where Daniel prophesies of a man unlike all others who'll be given dominion and honor at God's right hand. Jesus is saying, 'Fellas, I'm the one and only.'

And finally, Jesus also says we have to relate to him in a very particular way to have life. We have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. Now this was incredibly offensive to the Jews, smacking of cannibalism. But of course it's not cannibalism. Flesh and blood here are signs pointing us to Jesus' life and especially his *death*. In the Bible blood is often shorthand for *violent death*.

And so Jesus is saying that for you to have life, you need to ingest my death. You have to take the redeeming power of my death into your innermost being, so that your sins can be washed away. You must rely upon me and depend upon me, even more than on your morning coffee. Again, very exclusive.

But I want to point out, exclusivity is not necessarily offensive. You know, not all the electrical outlets in my house always work. But if you come over to my house to charge your phone and I say, ‘*Plug into this outlet, not that one.*’ You wouldn’t say, ‘*Oh no, how arrogant and intolerant...all outlets can charge a phone.*’ Or if your doctor says, ‘*You need this medicine and not that medicine,*’ you might disagree with your doctor, but you wouldn’t take it as a personal offence. Exclusivity is simply a fact of life. And spiritually, it really matters whether you’ve plugged your cord into the right outlet, the one with juice.

Indeed, even the most controversial practice of exclusivity—*proselytizing*—doesn’t need to give offense. Penn Jillette, the famous magician in the Penn and Teller act, *who is a militant atheist*, once said, ‘*I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize...If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell...and you think it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn’t believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.*’ Again, he’s an atheist! The gospel is exclusive, but we don’t have to take offence.

Secondly, there’s an incredible *physicality* to the gospel. In verse 54, Jesus proclaims the resurrection: ‘*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*’

Now the physicality of the gospel has long been scandalous to ‘enlightened’ people. People who see the human body as a prison of the soul and think our ultimate destiny is to float off into a disembodied Nirvana. To such people the idea, that God would take on flesh. That God would become a crying baby in manger, that God would suffer a horrifying death, and would be raised in a physical body, seems primitive and scandalous.

As Lord Byron said, ‘*A material resurrection seems strange and even absurd except for the purposes of punishment.*’ You get that? From Byron’s perspective, eternal physical life would be a *punishment*.

And yet, the gospel is shockingly and inescapably physical. God created the world and said it was good. God took on flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus was baptized in *water*. He multiplied loaves and fishes and healed sick people. He commanded us to remember him with bread and wine. He died a torturous *physical* death. After he was raised he cooked a meal of fish for his disciples and ate with them. And of course, the primary image for heaven is a wedding feast.

Speaking of feasts, here in John 6, the word Jesus uses for ‘feeding,’ ‘Trogo,’ is a very rare word in the NT. It occurs only 6 times, 4 of them right here. It means chomping down, gobbling up, feasting on (Bruner). It’s a visceral word for *continually* feeding on the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Yes, the physicality of the gospel can offend. But ultimately it’s good news. Because it means, as Charles Williams writes, ‘*The incarnation has forever hallowed flesh.*’ And thus the resurrection empowers us—like no other religion—to care for the poor and the sick and for God’s creation. It need not be offensive.

Thirdly, the gospel can be viewed as offensively intimate. Verse 56, ‘*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.*’ The key word is abide. It means to dwell with, to be knit to, to be rooted in fellowship. The promise of the gospel is that the God of the universe wants to make his home with us. As Jesus says, ‘*I stand at the door and knock. If anyone opens the door, I’ll come in and*

eat with him. Yes, the Bible says that God loves you. That he's numbered the hairs of your head and you are more precious to him than gold.

Now many see this as sentimental hogwash. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the former chief justice of the Supreme Court, once wrote in a letter to a friend, *I see no reason for attributing to a man a significance different in kind from that which belongs to a baboon or to a grain of sand...Doesn't all this squashy sentimentality about the dignity and sacredness of human life make you puke? O bring in the basin.*

Holmes sees this as nauseating sentimentality. Bring in the basin. And yet, on the last night of his life, Jesus got on his knees before people like you and me. And with a basin of water he washed our feet. And he said, *'No longer do I call you servants, but I call you friends.'* Whether we like it or not, the God of the Bible wants a personal relationship with us. The most meaningful and fulfilling friendship imaginable.

And so the gospel is exclusive, physical, and intimate, and fourthly the gospel also involves radical dependency. Verse 57, *'As I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.'* As Jesus relies wholly on the Father, so he tells us that our life will be radically dependent on him.

And of course this flies in the face of centuries of rugged Western individualism, a lifestyle immortalized in the great poem *Invictus*: *'It matters not how strait the gate, how charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.'*

Now this is wonderful poetry. But it's not Christian theology. The Bible tells us we are NOT masters of our fate. No, we're a bunch of stupid sheep who've gone astray. We've followed the devices and desires of our own hearts. Jesus says, *'without me you can do nothing.'*

Again, this is so offensive to good, upstanding, accomplished people. There was once a Duchess in England who was invited by a friend to hear George Whitfield preach. Afterwards she wrote a letter to her friend and said, *'It is monstrous to be told that you have a heart as sinful as the common wretches that crawl on the earth. This is highly offensive and insulting; and I cannot but wonder that your Ladyship should relish any sentiments so much at variance with high rank and good breeding.'*

And yet, for those of us who've had the good fortune to realize our wretchedness without God—that our lives are unmanageable—we know the tremendous freedom and joy there is in casting our cares upon Him. In the words of John Barr, *'What a wonderful relief it is to realize that you're only a planet and not the sun.'*

So we've seen how the gospel is exclusive, physical, intimate, dependent, the last thing we see in our passage is how the gospel is focused on mortality. Verse 58: *'This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.'* Jesus here draws a contrast: the Israelites who ate the manna in the wilderness all died, but those who feed on Jesus will live forever. In short, the gospel is a matter of life and death.

Now many of us try to avoid thinking about death. It seems morbid. But no, reflecting on death is one of the most life-giving spiritual disciplines there is. It actually brings out the richness of life.

One of the secrets of Johnathan Edwards's illustrious career was that he was constantly thinking about death. So much so that in his journals he often wrote in an offhand sort of way, *'While thinking about death.'* It almost got to the point where it was like, *'while thinking about death I brushed my teeth. While thinking about death, I ate my oatmeal.'*

And yet, this focus on death empowered Edwards to live life well. And it can do the same for us. This is actually one of the great opportunities of COVID. COVID invites us to reflect on our mortality. To live each day as if it were our last. To love people deeply in the knowledge that tomorrow is not promised anyone. And most importantly, to accept the truth of the gospel even though it may offend.

There's a disturbing scene in CS Lewis' novel, *The Great Divorce*. A man dies and arrives at the gates of heaven. And to his horror, he finds that a forgiven murderer has been sent to bring him in. This offends his dignity and he responds,

'I've gone straight all my life. I don't say I was a religious man and I don't say I had no faults...But I done my best all my life, see? I done my best by everyone...and what I don't see is why I should be put below a murderer like you.'

The murderer responds, *'Who knows whether you will be? Only be happy and come with me.'*

But the man continues, *'I'm only telling you the sort of chap I am. I only want my rights. I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity.'*

The murderer responds, *'Then do. At once. Ask for the Bleeding Charity. Everything is here for the asking and nothing can be bought.'*

But the man is increasingly affronted and concludes, *'Tell them I'm not coming, see? I'd rather be damned than go along with you. I came here to get my rights, see? Not to go sniveling along on charity, tied onto your apron-strings.'* And in his pride he walks away.

My friends, today Jesus Christ stands before us, as he did before the disciples, and asks, 'Does this offend you?' *Now some things certainly will.* But don't be that man who turns away. However the gospel offends you, humble yourself and accept the gift. The bleeding charity. Jesus humbled himself beyond recognition for you, being flayed alive and nailed to a tree. And he stands before you now, saying, *'Lay down your offense, whatever it is, and accept the gift, more precious than gold. That you and I may walk together until the stars grow dim.'* Let's pray.