

## **John 38 – A Hard Teaching**

11/24/2024

### **Scripture 1: (Jn. 6:59-71 ESV)**

Jesus said these things in the synagogue, as he taught at Capernaum. 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.

## Sermon:

Most of this chapter has been given over to things which Jesus said and taught in the Capernaum synagogue. His extraordinary teaching and assertion that, *"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe."* (Jn. 6:35-36 ESV) occurred during a time of formal worship and in a place for orthodox religious teaching.

Therefore, if what Jesus said and taught was "out of line" or out of accord with accepted religious truth; if Jesus spoke "blasphemy", then He could have, would have, should have, and must have been immediately corrected, rebuked, and condemned for it. Common synagogue practice permitted and even encouraged the reading and exhorting of Scripture by wise members of the laity {a practice we find evidenced in the Gospels (Luke 4:16-30) and in the frequent reception of Paul, as described in Acts (Acts 13:15-43)}, but someone still would have served as "synagogue master", as an authority figure. There still would have been a local, official arbiter of "truth" present and available for appeal or to answer questions, even though this was a hundred years before the rise of the formal Rabbinic tradition with which we are familiar today. Surely it was a sign of the respect that the people held for Jesus and His ordinarily clear wisdom, as well as their acceptance of His word as truth, that He was unquestioned.

- Although Jesus received no formal discipline or rebuke for this teaching, the conclusion of this chapter demonstrates a rebuke from the world along with the worldly consequences that Jesus received.

*"When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?'"*. These "many disciples" were the crowd who had first received the miraculous feeding and then searched for Jesus in Capernaum, although it is unlikely that the whole host was present and in attendance. It is more probable that Jesus's words and teaching were being relayed and shared with disciples on the outside and then with others over the next several hours and days. News of this particular teaching would surely have spread like wildfire.

Thus their response of, *"This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"*, should be unsurprising because we also feel the same, deep down. These are very hard and difficult teachings for anyone to accept, much less to live in belief of. It is impossible for us to believe in and trust in Jesus as our only hope for salvation, and as our source of confidence in being justified and accepted by the LORD God, according to our own power and ability. We require the Holy Spirit's help to both believe and to be sustained within our faith in Jesus.

So, in a sense, these Jews actually were right. They were simply being honest, just not honest in the sense that they thought they were. If they were considering this philosophically, culturally, and pragmatically then, they were one hundred percent correct because no one could possibly listen to, accept, and abide by this teaching without help. That was why Jesus previously said, *"**All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.**"* (Jn. 6:37-39 ESV), to warn and encourage those of us who believe that our Father in heaven is our sole help (Psalm 121:1), and to build up our hope in Jesus' promise to preserve them through this teaching.

*"But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples were grumbling about this, said to them, 'Do you take offense at this?'"*. He asked them whether they took offense at His teaching that they must trust in Him: to trust in His righteousness; for their right standing before the LORD, rather than trusting in themselves and their own works.

- Is that not offensive to us?

What Jesus demands of us, by insisting upon our having *pisteuo* in Him, is a great act of humility on our part. It is a needful act of submission for us to depend upon God's grace alone, because when we do, if we do so truly, then we must admit that we cannot do it by ourselves and that we need His help. Believing in Jesus Christ and trusting in Him requires the death of our sinful pride and our sinful self righteousness: the two things which our sinful nature loves most and best; therefore, it is no wonder that “worldly people” and unregenerate, reprobate people will always take offense to Jesus' proclamation of His Gospel.

“*Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?*”. Jesus suggests one final, ultimate Sign and wonder, almost sarcastically implying that they would not even believe that; thinking that that too must be some kind of “trick” or falsehood. Truly, if that evidence would not convince them, then surely no evidence and no earthly argument would; not even Jesus' resurrection. God alone can convince them.

“*It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all.*”. Jesus has kept on repeating this point, emphasizing it and hammering it home because since we all have the desire to have a positive impact upon our salvation, we need to be regularly reminded that the only thing we do for it, is to sin and make the atoning work of Christ necessary.

Then finally, Jesus concludes this round of teaching by saying “*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe. ... This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*”. He reaffirms that what He has said and taught is spiritual and life giving. Even though heeding and following His words will enable a person to live in communion and fellowship with both God and man, Jesus knows that not everyone will do so. Although the LORD “...*desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth...*” (1 Tim. 2:4 ESV), Scripture makes it apparent that He does not **will** that all people shall, since all people are not drawn to Christ because if they were, then that would be “universalism”: a damnable heresy clearly refuted both by Scripture and our experience. The Father has clearly not given everyone to Christ, because there are so many people who reject Jesus and deny God. They live as if there is no tomorrow with no final judgment.

That is the world's true religion:

- a nihilistic existence devoid of all meaning, except for whatever meaning each individual might choose to impart;
- an existence where there is neither past nor future, only the infinite present;
- a world without any absolute right or wrong because everything is subjected to every individual's perspective and preference;
- a world where the only constant is inconstancy and the only thing ordered and expected is chaos.

Is there any sane reason why a person would want to live in such a world?

- Yet sin is not sane.
  - Sin: disobedience to and rebellion against the One Person who possesses the power and ability to create you, the world, and everything in it and also therefore, the power and ability to unmake you on account of your offensiveness; is the most insane thing imaginable.

So, because everyone sins and thus “...[falls] *short of the glory of God...*” (Romans 3:23), we understand that the ordinary state of humanity is hopeless unless, until, and except that the LORD acts and does something about it since, if we honestly wanted to be better people, or to do any differently, then we would, if we could.

There are few harder truths for a person to accept than the fact they are unable do something which they desire to do. But the encouraging news is, if a person does not want to believe in God or to trust in Jesus Christ, then they will not and they will not be bothered by their incapacity. So:

- if you do believe in Jesus Christ (or only think that you might be believing); and,
- if something causes you to question or doubt that faith; and,
- if your questioning or doubting bothers you or causes you distress, worry, and fear for your salvation or faith;
- then, be encouraged because that is a sign that your faith is real and true; and,
- then, be encouraged because you are being given the opportunity to pray like the father of a demonically possessed son, "*I believe; help my unbelief!*" (Mk. 9:24 ESV); and,
- then, be encouraged because by this you may know that your heart and your mind have been converted; and,
- then, be encouraged because this is a sign that you do not lack faith, but understanding; something that you will gain over time: gaining experience through life, prayerful patience, and study.

It is important for us to remember that those who do not believe, do not care and are completely unconcerned that they do not believe. There is nothing which we can do that might change it, except to pray for them, and to continue living an exemplary and godly life, and to continue loving our neighbors as Jesus has first loved us.

After hearing these teachings of Jesus, "...*many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*". Many of those who were still "worldly", carnal, and unregenerate abandoned Jesus and His teaching. This was:

- the world rebuking Him for speaking God's truth;
- the world abandoning Him by withdrawing the appearance of its favor;
- the world denying Him prestige and influence over the hearts and minds of these people, just as it does for everyone who has not (yet) called by the Father.

However, this statement by the Evangelist is not devoid of all hope for these "disciples". We should not assume that this must necessarily have been a final walking away for them. Many could have fallen away only "for a time", like so many Christians who sometimes "backslide" and fall back into sinful activities and practices, temporarily.

- Although we shall never know for certain in this life, we still hold out hope for these disciples because there was hope for us and, while life remains, there is hope for everyone that we know, love, and hold dear who appear far from the LORD.
- We simply must remember that our time, our schedule, and our plan is not God's. He is not subject to our whims and wants. His plan and His timing is far better than ours could possibly be.
- This just was not God's time for them, yet.

We should also consider the likelihood that many of these disciples were probably present in Jerusalem on Pentecost {this is more than idle speculation since, if they were serious enough about their Jewish to have "tried" following Jesus, then they were most likely serious enough to have kept God's command to attend the

three required feasts (Passover, “Pesach”; Weeks, “Shavuot”, or Pentecost; and Booths, Tabernacles, “Sukkot”)). Therefore, as the Gospel seed was already planted, it would be reasonable for the Holy Spirit to cause their dormant faith to sprout upon hearing Peter's proclamation of the resurrection, if that were the divinely appointed time for their calling and conversion. Also, as the Jews' persecution of early Christians increased, the Gospel witness expanded and took hold throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and out to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8); so, it is difficult to imagine that none of these early disciples were later truly converted and returned to Christ according to Jesus's promise that “*I should lose nothing of all that he [the Father] has given me...*” (Jn. 6:39 ESV)

This story leaves us to wonder however, whether Jesus felt, in His human nature, a measure of disappointment and discouragement whenever people forsook Him, denied Him, abandoned Him, and ignored Him despite the fact that He “...*knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.*”. I think that perhaps, His foreknowledge made this actuality even more grievous and painful to bear.

The prophet Isaiah wrote about the “Suffering Servant”: the messianic figure of Old Testament prophecy whom Jesus embodied; saying, “*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*” (Isa. 53:3 ESV). We most commonly, recall this description in relation to Jesus' final rejection by the Jewish people and His abandonment by the Twelve upon His arrest and execution. Yet, I believe the Evangelist shows us that this feeling and experience was a more common companion to Christ. I think that it was because of this human emotion: Him being overwhelmed by a sense of betrayal and abandonment; which prompted Jesus to next turn to “the Twelve”: His closest companions and disciples; and ask them, “*Do you want to go away as well?*”.

Considering our own recent soul-searching, with each of us asking ourselves “Why do I seek Jesus?”, think about the answers that you have given yourself: if you were to hear Jesus ask you, “*Do you want to go away as well?*”, then how would you answer Him?

- Are the teachings of Jesus too challenging for you to believe and accept?
  - Are you too proud to depend upon the grace of God, trusting to faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-10)?
  - Or, are you willing to accept and affirm His moral lessons, yet still refuse to also accept His claim of divinity and its evidence?
- Are the commandments of Christ too difficult for you to obey?
  - Will you refuse to love your neighbor as an expression of your love for Jesus (Mark 12:29-31)?
  - Do you not want to “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Luke 6:31)?
- Have you found a more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31) to live life than as a follower of Jesus, empowered by His Holy Spirit?
  - Will any other way of life make you more happy, fulfilled, and satisfied in the long run?
  - Could you live any other kind of life and not look back with profound regrets during your final hour?

Ultimately, the answer you gave yourself for why you are seeking Jesus, must inform your answer to Jesus' asking, “*Do you want to go away as well?*”, just as it did for the Twelve.

“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.”*”. Peter responded to Jesus by asking Him, “To whom shall we go?”; “Who else has the answer to the questions that we have not even thought to ask?”; “Who else knows and teaches the truth of God?”.

- Peter's response denies the potential “rightness” of all other religions, removing any opportunity or Biblical rationale for a Christian to justify harmonizing Jesus with any pagan religion like: Islam, Buddhism, Hindu, Neo-paganism, or Judaism, naturalism, socialism, or any other form of politicism.
- Peter professed to Jesus, that “*You have the words of eternal life ...*”, demonstrating that he already understood that following Jesus is the only way for a person to enjoy true fellowship and peace with the LORD. It was clear to him that Jesus was greater than Moses; that what Jesus taught was greater than the Law of Moses and its interpretation by the scribes and Pharisees.
- Peter confessed to Jesus, on behalf of the Twelve {although we know that he was wrong about one}, that “*...we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*”. He declared and affirmed:
  - that they had faith, *pisteuo*, in Him;
  - that they understood, *ginosko*, Who He is; that Jesus is “*the Holy One of God*”, the Christ, and the Son of Man;
  - that they were following Him because of Who He Is.
- Peter's ecstatic affirmation and confession denies the possibility that the disciples might have considered Jesus to only be a “good teacher”, “wise philosopher”, or simply a “moralist”.

Clearly, based upon Peter's response, John tells us definitively that the Twelve were seeking and following Jesus for the right reason, unlike the crowd.

- They knew Who Jesus is, although it is certain that they did not yet understand the fullness of what this meant.
- They already were trusting Him, but they certainly did not yet understand the full entirety of what they were trusting Him for.
- They clearly honored and respected Him, because they had abandoned their ordinary lives: their families and their vocations; to follow Him since they recognized that it was the right thing to do and because they knew that what they were doing was ultimately for God's glory and His divine purposes.
- They followed Jesus for the right reason, because He is “*the Holy One of God*” and this was the only right response.

Throughout this chapter, John has recorded Jesus saying several very hard teachings, particularly:

- that the teachings of Moses are insufficient for a person to be justified before the LORD, but that Jesus's are sufficient instead (6:30-33);
- that Jesus has been sent by the LORD: that He has come down from heaven physically, despite everyone knowing His close relations (6:41-42);

- that He will lose no one that the Father gives to Him (6:39);
- that everyone whom the Father gives to Him shall have *pisteuo* in Jesus; and,
- that He shall raise them up on the last day (6:40);
- that no one can come to Him and no one shall have *pisteuo* in Him except and unless the Father, the LORD, first draws them and gives them to Him (6:44); with them being all those whom the Father has specially chosen;
- that, according to the prophets, since {everyone will be taught by God} (6:45) then, everyone so taught will be those who come to Him; because believing and understanding this about Jesus is evidence that the Father draws them and gives them to Him; that they have specifically been chosen for Christ;
- that Jesus will give His righteousness and His very life as a substitute for these chosen ones, in order to redeem them from sharing in the condemnation of the world (6:51); and,
- that lastly, Jesus will do all of this to inaugurate and establish the “new covenant” which the prophets wrote about: the covenant of grace which He has mediated with our heavenly Father (6:53-58).

Again, all of these teachings, whether they are considered individually or together, were challenging and impossible for Jesus' original Jewish hearers to accept without them first having a severe cardiac adjustment by the Holy Spirit, just as these are challenging and impossible for all of the rest of humanity without a similar adjustment.

Just as the Law of Moses was made so difficult to obey fully and keep in order to demonstrate and prove to us our incapacity, so too, these teachings are so difficult for us to accept in order to demonstrate and prove to us our incapacity. Both administrations of the covenant of grace: the Law of Moses and the Gospel of Jesus Christ; require of us something that is impossible for us to give: perfect obedience and fidelity to the LORD's covenant making a substitute necessary. The recognition of our own incapacity awakens within the regenerate a knowledge of our need for God's grace and mercy; a need which we find being met through our drawing to Christ, and which is filled through our faith and trust in Him. It is this awareness of our need and our understanding of the unique capacity of Jesus to satisfy our need that prompts us to seek Him, truly.

There is a popular metaphor which suggests that there is a Jesus shaped hole within every person's heart and we each spend our lives trying to fill it, while only one thing (one person can). We spend our whole time of reprobation trying to fill this hole with everything that the world has to offer but, despite some things that seem close, nothing does. It is only after the Holy Spirit works within us, after we have heard the Gospel proclaimed that that hole gets filled, that now, instead of pouring the empty pleasures of sin into that hole, we seek Jesus and His Spirit keeps on being poured into us, filling us, and overflowing us.

{A final note and evidence concerning predestination and “double predestination” is found in the final two verses of this chapter, “*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.*”. Here we find a reminder and affirmation of Jesus' sovereign choice of the Twelve. We know that He chose to call them and we know that He also chose to set them apart differently and closer to Himself than all of the other disciples (Matthew 10:1-2; Mark 3:14-15; Luke 6:13), this is a clear example of Election unto faithfulness and thus salvation. However, we also see Jesus' admission of also having chosen one to be “a devil”: an accuser and betrayer; Judas Iscariot. This is also a clear example of Election unto reprobation, marking the other side of the

predestination “coin”. Some like {the Eleven} are elected and predestined unto salvation while the rest, like {the One, Judas} are necessarily elected and predestined unto damnation.}

So, when we are asked, “Why are you seeking Jesus?”, are you able to answer the same as Peter answered Jesus when He was asked, “*Do you want to go away as well?*”? I hope so.

I hope that you can and will confess your faith in and understanding about Jesus Christ, just like Peter did and for the same reason: that you believe because you know Who Jesus is and because the Father has chosen you and given you to Christ.

**AMEN**