

Teaching the “Hard Sayings”

The sixth chapter of John depicts a drastic swing in the way in which the public perceived Jesus. The chapter opens with Jesus miraculously feeding about five thousand individuals with five loaves and two fish. Impressed by Jesus' ability and apparently hoping for additional meals at the Savior's hand, the multitude followed Him, at one point even wanting to forcibly appoint Him as their king (John 6:15). In John 6:26 we read of how Jesus confronted the crowd with the fact that they were only following Him because He had fed them. From that point, the Lord began to get more pointed about what He had really come to earth for and what they should really be seeking instead of bread. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said in John 6:35. Going even deeper into spiritual truth, He said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” (John 6:53). Of course, He was not advocating cannibalism but was instead telling them that they needed to give their all to Him, to completely partake of His will, if they wanted to enjoy eternal life. Still, this was difficult for the audience to grasp. They were satisfied with just getting free meals. If He could do that for them then He would be a worthy king indeed. But now He's saying there's more to following Him. He's indicating that there is a commitment required on their part.

With the words of Jesus in their minds, many in the crowd do a 180 degree turn and walk away from the Lord. “Many therefore of his disciples, when they heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (John 6:60). Jesus asked them, “Doth this offend you?” (John 6:61). “Are you offended because I spoke to you of spiritual commitment on your part?” John 6:66 says, “From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him.” What started out in the chapter as a significant number of disciples walking with Jesus quickly turned into a large number of those very same individuals walking away from Him. What changed? He was still the same caring Master who had compassionately fed them. He still loved them. It's just that now they realized that more was expected of them than they had previously thought. They wanted at least the physical blessings that the Lord could provide, but they did not want to commit themselves to following His will so that they could enjoy the spiritual blessings.

“This is an hard saying.” “We don't want to hear this.” “We'll follow you and be your friends as long as we agree with what you say, but don't ask anymore than that from us.” The attitude reminds us of the Christians in Galatia of whom Paul asked, “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (Galatians 4:16). He had enjoyed their love and favor for some time, but they had drifted from the truth. Was Paul treating them any differently than when he first got to know them? No, it's just that they had gone off into error and apparently didn't appreciate Paul correcting them.

Today's world is probably not much different than it ever has been, but it's clear that there are many today who have a “let's just get along” attitude in spiritual matters. Some expect preachers today to be cheerleaders, not “toe stompers.” As long as the man says that which is agreeable and not offensive, then he's a good preacher or a fine teacher or an exceptional writer. But let him step over some humanly drawn line into territory which is considered “controversial,” and suddenly he's negative or narrow-minded or unloving.

It's easy to speak and write things that many find agreeable. We can talk about love and doing good to others and heaven and the “amens” will be heard far and wide. But what happens when we show from the Scriptures that denominationalism is not approved by God? What happens when we show from the Scriptures that women are not authorized to be preachers, that the Holy Spirit does not work miraculously today or that the New Testament does not authorize instrumental music in worship to God? If the same man who accurately and scripturally sets forth the truth about love, good works and heaven is preaching the truth on these other subjects, why would we suddenly question his motives and stop studying that which he is teaching?

There are indeed “hard sayings” in the Word of God. There are things in there we might not want to hear. Will we do like those disciples in John 6 and walk away? Will we instead be like Peter who, when Jesus asked, “Will ye also go away?” replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” (John 6:67-68). Too many times people say, “I don't want to talk about it” when taught things from God's Word which they themselves do not practice. May our attitudes be like that of Peter

and realize that, no matter how hard they might seem to us, the Lord's words "are not grievous" (1 John 5:3).

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