

John 6:60-69

***⁶⁰ On hearing it, many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"
⁶¹ Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶² What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! ⁶³ The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. ⁶⁴ Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. ⁶⁵ He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him."⁶⁶ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.⁶⁷ "You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve. ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."***

Follow Jesus No Matter the Circumstance

- 1. Do not Follow the Crowds that Leave Him.***
- 2. Stand Firm and Confess Jesus as LORD.***

A favorite pastime of those who visit this church, especially when there is an event in the church basement, is to page through the confirmation pictures that are on display. It is an enjoyable activity to find images of faithful members pictured as their younger selves. But this enjoyable activity of nostalgia, this run down memory lane, also does reveal a sad truth. Not everyone who is confirmed in the faith continues in their membership at this church. In fact, there are quite a few faces in those pictures that no longer attend any church at all. That is the case not only for this congregation, but this is the unfortunate circumstance for many congregations. A survey of the confirmation pictures, whether they are hung along the wall, held in some photo album, or merely held in our memory banks, reveal a number of those who confessed their faith and were apparent disciples and followers of Jesus, but now it appears that they have forgotten about, wandered away, or abandoned the very faith that they once publicly confessed.

For one reason or another young men and women especially, abandon the faith. Maybe they slowly drift away. A Sunday here or there, turns into a month away, a summer off, and then no more. Maybe it is a bit more sudden. Perhaps confirmation is viewed as graduation and they consider themselves done. The students that were there for Sunday school at Catechism every week have not been seen for years. All that they learned has been left behind. Or maybe some moment or situation confronts this believer who is still not mature enough in their faith to handle such a challenge properly. A choice, a difficult challenge to their faith, a teaching that causes them consternation in a practical situation, and their thinking changes from what they have learned from Scripture in favor of what the world teaches and espouses. They bend on this teaching and that practice, and then the find it difficult to be devoted to their faith in Jesus. Maybe they will visit once in a while for

Christmas or Easter, or some other big event, but their faith in Jesus is no longer an important part of their life anymore. Their connection to Christ is more causal than committed and sadly that connection all too often begins to fade all together.

Many different reasons could be sighted for their departure: different directions that a person's life takes, teachings that are disagreed with, or perhaps, when they just look around they simply do not see similar faces. And so they leave. And that can have a profound impact on the body of believers. It is one thing to see that the world rejects him, it is another difficult challenge to our faith when we must watch as so many from among our family of believers walk away from following Jesus. However, Jesus reminds that he wants his disciples to follow him no matter the circumstance. He wants us to follow him no matter what the multitudes, the circle of peers, or friends and neighbors, the crowds around us, feel about him and his teachings. Instead of following the crowds, we are to stand firm in our faith as we confess with our words and our lives that Jesus is LORD.

It is rather evident that the teachings of Jesus aren't specifically designed to be crowd pleasers. When talking about discipleship, when teaching about following him, Jesus refers to discipleship often as a difficult thing. Here we listen to that crowd of disciples say, **"This is a hard teaching."** Jesus is saying that he was the bread of life, but it appears that many were finding his teachings a bit difficult to swallow.

What a gut check moment this must have been for those 12 disciples! Look at the hordes of people that just up and left Jesus. Look at the crowds that followed casually, but then left when Jesus talked about a full commitment. Remember that in this section of John chapter 6 Jesus is presenting these crowds with the difficult truth that following him is not like following your favorite local performer to simply see what would happen next, but to follow him was a serious thing. There was no partial commitment to him, but he was calling his disciples to be all in. **"You must eat my flesh and drink my blood."** This was to be the extent of their faith. They were to believe and trust in him alone. They were not to just draw inspiration from him while taking in a few miracles and then off they went to the next new thing. They were not to take his truth and mix it with their own. Rather, Jesus expected his disciples to trust in him solely and to follow him with all their hearts, with all their souls, with all their mind. Those who would follow him, were to confess him as Lord and conform their lives to his teachings. This was a difficult thing for many to accept, but this was absolutely necessary. After all, he was the Son of God. He was the living bread from heaven. He was the way, the truth, the life.

To those who were more causally connected to Jesus than totally committed, the objectors in the crowd had probably hit a few nerves as they brought up some points that at the time made some pretty good sense. ***"Isn't this Mary's son? How can he say that he came down from heaven?" "What does he mean eat my flesh and drink his blood?"*** And so you can see why a person in that crowd might react in the following way. ***"This is all a little bit too much for me to handle. He wants me to believe all of this, that he is the Christ, to follow him, to suffer for my faith in him. Well, I don't know Jesus. Thanks for the miracles, but on second thought this discipleship thing seems like a bit much."***

The massive multitude that followed this miracle worker, suddenly started to thin as crowds of people turned and went the other way. That sudden exodus would certainly have had an impact. How much easier it must have been to leave when so many others were leaving! Many people left Jesus and went the other way. How the Savior's heart must have

sunk! Sure he knew it was coming, but still, it wasn't just a few, but we are told at least twice that *many* people left.

There can be a bit of a crowd mentality when it comes to practicing your faith, and living as a Christian. There can be a negative crowd mentality that takes its sad effect. When so many young people see their peers leaving it becomes easier to follow suit. And this not only effects their peers but when the older generation sees young people leaving they too may become unencouraged or uninspired in their faith. Also those children going through the Sunday school and Catechism years, what are they to think when there often is this apparent lack of interest from young adults and older members?

There is really no disputing that this kind of occurrence is common among churches today. Numerous studies, from a wide variety of sources, and our own experience in local declining numbers, makes it clear that there are many who are leaving the Christian Church, and that church attendance and the overall opinion of the Christian church is not what it used to be. That can certainly shake the confidence of the average believer so much that a person surrounded by such a decline, such a widespread exodus can quite easily lead an individual into quiet spiritual apathy before eventually becoming one of those missing faces.

Look at the crowds of people that are turning away and it is disheartening. Look at the crowds of people turning away, the empty churches, the once faithful crowds turning into faithless masses as they turn away from Jesus! Look, and the questions naturally come! *What am I doing here? Why is this important to me, when so many people couldn't seem to care about God, or believing in Jesus, or following his will?* Those thoughts come. For we are sinful, and weak, and therefore easily influenced. Those tests and challenges to our faith are all the more very real. And the LORD Jesus recognizes this sad truth in this sinful world and he wants to prepare you for such challenges.

As those crowds turn from him, as so many walked away, it is important to note how Jesus responds. Jesus does not call to the crowds and beg them to stay. He does not soften his stance on this or that, instead Jesus continues to call his disciples to stand firm, to listen to his word of truth, to follow him in belief and in practice, to be committed, to be devoted. As those crowds were walking away Jesus speaks of his word as Spirit and life. He speaks of the gift of faith that can only come from the Father. And as those crowds continued to thin Jesus turns to his 12 disciples, he turns to those who have learned from him and have followed him and he says to them. ⁶⁷ ***"You do not want to leave too, do you?"*** And Jesus says this not because he is suddenly insecure in who he is and what he has come to do. He does not ask this question because he is so concerning that his popularity numbers are slipping in the latest polls, but Jesus asks the question so that his followers might step up and make their confession and state their faith in Him.

In the midst of that surreal scene, as so many people were walking away, just walking away, from Jesus, our Savior posed that poignant question. And all it took was one to speak up. Peter, that spokesman for the disciples, would not fail in giving an answer. Even though he saw all those people leave, Peter knew that this was the place to be. This was the One he had to follow, this was the One that he had to, just had to believe and trust in for he knew from experience that Jesus was the Holy One of God. Jesus was the Christ, the Savior of the world. Not only was there no better option, there was no other option. ⁶⁷ ***"You do not want to leave too, do you?" Jesus asked the Twelve.*** ⁶⁸ ***Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to***

whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

Peter spoke up. All it took was one to speak up, to stand firm, and the rest of the group was encouraged. All it takes is one or a faithful few to stand up and make a difference! What a blessing that when so many are going the other way, that one or two or a faithful few stand up, and say with their words and their actions, their regular attendance, *“There is nowhere else I would rather be?”* We give thanks for our members, young and old, who confess with their words and their actions. *“We believe in Jesus as our Savior. We believe in him and trust in him as the way to eternal life. Where else would go?”* What a blessing it is to have young adults among us, who set aside time to show that your Savior is important to you! What a blessing it is to have those faithful members who were baptized and confirmed and married in this church, and who have been members for how many years, still faithfully attending! What a blessing it is to have a growing number of children within our ranks! No matter what group you fall into, don't underestimate the positive encouragement your presence here can have on those around you? Don't underestimate the positive impact your public confession can have on your family members, and your neighbors, and those in your life?

As we live in a world where thoughtless thousands choose that path toward sin and destruction it is only by God's grace are our eyes drawn away from those fleeing crowds, and instead our eyes are fixed on Jesus. By God's grace he has drawn us to himself. He has placed before us these words of everlasting life. He has given us his Spirit, so that we may have faith and life in his name. And because of that faith, because of that spiritual life, we look to him whom has given us eternal life and we believe and we trust in him. We listen to our Savior's word of truth and we gladly follow Jesus with our heart, with our soul, with our lives.

We confess him as Lord and follow his lead with thanksgiving and praise, because He is the one who came down from heaven to save us. He is the one who came down from his glorious throne in heaven even though he knew that he would be rejected. He came down and became a man, even though he knew he was going to have to go through that horrible human pain of rejection. Even though he knew his heart would be crushed as so many went the other way, even though he knew his body would be crushed as he would be betrayed and handed over to those who would crucify him, even though he knew of all of this he still went through with God's plan to save us sinners. In his great love for you and me, he still came down, and lived and taught, suffered and died, so that you and I could have his words of eternal life. The one who came down from heaven and has returned to his rightful place in glory, gives to us so freely what no one else could give: forgiveness of all our sins, freedom from guilt and the power of sin, peace and security in his love and care, wisdom and understanding that comes from his word, and the absolute joy that is to come, the gift of eternal life.

It's not easy to watch so many drift away or walk away from their Savior, but when our faith is tested in this way, when these sad statistics trouble us and introduce any sort of doubt or worry, Peter's response still says it all, ***“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”*** May our faithful Lord grant us his grace so that this too is always our response. Amen.