Beeson Podcast, Episode #661

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>>Announcer:

Welcome to the Beeson podcast, coming to you from Beeson Divinity School on the campus of Samford University. Now your host, Doug Sweeney.

>>Doug Sweeney:

Welcome to the Beeson Podcast. I’m your host, Doug Sweeney. Welcome back to our Summer 2023 Greatest Hits Podcast Series. Today we’re delighted to present a sermon preached by Dr. Oswaldo Padilla of the Beeson faculty in 2011 as part of our chapel series that year on the Witness of the Fourth Gospel. Dr. Padilla’s sermon is entitled, “Receiving the Hard Saying,” and it is taken from John 6 in which Dr. Padilla wrestles with why the crowds ultimately rejected Jesus. Dr. Padilla skillfully exposits the text of scripture to reveal the spiritual misunderstanding which led to the crowd’s rejection.

This passage contains the hard saying in which Jesus tells the crowds that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Dr. Padilla helps us to think through this hard saying and what it might have meant for the original audience and what it means for the church and our mission in the world.

Let’s go again to Hodges Chapel and listen to Dr. Oswaldo Padilla.

>>Padilla:

Good morning to you all. I was thinking that it wouldn’t be such a bad thing to preach every Tuesday if that meant getting a parking spot right at the front there. Not a bad deal at all.

Thank you to all of you who ... Jimmy, Paul, and Gabrielle for reading the scripture so well for us. Let’s now focus on our text of John 6. It was only a matter of time before the clash between Jesus and the crowd happened. John himself had told us this in his prologue. He was in the world and the world was made through him. Yet the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own people did not receive him.

Why did this happen? Why this rejection of Jesus? Although the answer is of course not at all simple, let me suggest that in this passage it was a tragic case of spiritual misunderstanding. Notice that I did not say simple misunderstanding, for that would give the impression that the crowd’s rejection of Jesus was simply a matter of the intellect, a failure of communication perhaps, or simply a matter of confusion of semantics. No, it was spiritual misunderstanding.

Their hearts, in the Jewish sense of that term, were not on the same horizon as Jesus. Again, in the words of John, this time from the third chapter, and this is a judgment, “The light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light, because their works were evil.” Why then did Jesus and the crowd clash? Because he was sent from the Father but they had killed those sent from the Father. Because he was from above and they were from below. Because he was the Light of the World while they were blind. Because he was the Son of God but they were children of the devil. The light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light. Because their works were evil.

Curiously enough, on this occasion the clash had come about because of something as mundane as bread. This shouldn’t surprise us, by the way, for it is often in the seemingly mundane aspects of life that God shows us how far we are from him. When we are hungry, when we are thirsty, when we have deadlines, when we have to be patient. As the Israelites too, it was when they were hungry that they say, “We want to go back to Egypt! We’re sick of this manna. We want fish and onions and garlic.”

But to return to our chapter, you will recall that in the previous section to this passage, Jesus had performed a mighty miracle. A large crowd of about 5,000. Now recall that John only talks to us about the males who were there. There surely were women and children. So, it’s a larger crowd than 5,000. But this crowd had followed him and Jesus having compassion on them and wanting to test his disciples had fed them. Taking five barley loaves and two fish he had given thanks and in a way that we simply cannot understand he had multiplied the bread and fed the large hungry crowd.

From the perspective of the crowd this was wonderful. Think about it. Reclining on the green grass of the mountain with their friends, eating bread and fish, listening to the word of God. And all of this for free! Wonderful. But it was not just a blissful moment. For they knew their scriptures. And it is quite possible that they had Isaiah 25:6 in mind on this mountain the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food.

Since Jesus was miraculously providing this rich feast for the crowd, the conclusion was that it was at last the time of the Messiah. And that meant a lot of things. It meant wealth and health and finally the time to take it to the Romans and the Gentiles who had oppressed them for so long. In verse 14 in fact they say this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world. It is as if they are saying, redemption is at-hand. It is time to act! In fact, in an explanatory aside, John tells us what their goal was. Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king in their own terms. Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

It was this intended action that revealed how far their hearts were from God. What they really wanted was easy and instant gratification. Not reconciliation with God. Because of the hardness of their hearts they had it all wrong. N T Wright puts it in an inimitable way when he says that on the one hand for the unbelieving Jews the enemy was Rome and the problem was oppression. For Jesus, on the other hand, the real enemy was Satan and the real problem was sin.

The way of God is not in the shedding of blood in a revolution to bring about the kingdom. But rather to trust in the shed blood of the lamb to enter that kingdom. Don’t misunderstand – it is not that Jesus does not care or does not intend at one point to reverse the fortunes of the oppressed and to destroy the harlot Babylon. He will do this. And as we are told, in the apocalypse the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God.

But precisely in order to have the kingdom of God and this new earth there needs to be those who are the people of God, the redeemed, the reconciled. And for this it is the forgiveness of sins that is essential. As the disciples in the Book of Acts, we’ll learn later, Jesus says it is not for you to know the times or the seasons of the kingdom. Your job, he says, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses. They will proclaim forgiveness of sins in no other name. This was the issue.

And this then brings us to verses 25 and forward. The central dialogue between Jesus and the crowd. They come in a seemingly respectful and pious manner. Imagine, they come to Jesus and they say, “Rabbi, when do you come here?” But Jesus who knows what is in the heart of man, as we have already been told in John 1, responds rather cuttingly. He says to them, “Truly, truly,” one of those truly-truly’s, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” Well, of course they have seen the signs. They have seen the sign of the feeding and perhaps other signs. But they had not seen past the sign to the reality of the identity of Jesus and his own demands. So, in a sense, they have not seen the signs.

Jesus goes further. He says, “Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on Him, God the Father has set his seal.” He’s speaking compassionately to them. This was an echo I think of Isaiah 55:2-3. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? And your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear and come to me. Hear that your soul may live.” This is what Jesus has in mind.

But they had been stung by Jesus’ unmasking answer. And instead of wanting to follow him and listen further to his word they want now to begin a rabbinical debate. They say, okay, you’re talking about doing the will of God? What must we do to be doing the works of God? A rabbinical debate, you see?

Of course they knew the answer, you must obey Torah in order to do the works of God. Perhaps like the rich young ruler they want to debate what the most important command is. They want debate. But Jesus’ response shocks them even further when he says to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom he has sent.” Their answer now becomes completely ridiculous. Then what signs do you do that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Had they not just seen the feeding of the 5,000? Or perhaps they are not denying that and what they’re asking is for yet another sign. In any case, both are worthy of condemnation. On the one hand you have stiff-necked unbelief, on the other one you have manipulation of God. They’re both wrong.

But they go on and they say, “Lord, our fathers at the manna in the wilderness. As it is written, he gave them bread from heaven to eat.” Now what they want to do is they wish to pit Moses against Jesus. He gave us the manna. What do you give us? Implied in the statement is also the following – surely, you are not comparing yourself to our legislator, Moses?

And so the debate continues. Jesus explaining to them in a beautiful way that although the fathers ate the manna they nevertheless perished. But he gives them the bread that gives true eternal life. But what is this bread? The shocking answer comes in verse 35. He says, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me shall not hunger. And whoever believes in me shall not thirst.”

Needless to say this response shocks them even further. How dare this fellow speak this way! We know his father, Joseph, and his mother. What is this nonsense that he has come from Heaven? We know who he is. They have now completely rejected him and now he’s going to confirm them in their willful rejection.

This is what happens, by the way, many times in our own lives. I have a family member who continues to reject the gospel and looks for excuse after excuse. The first excuse was, “I see that you guys have become Christians. But you guys haven’t really changed.” Well, after five, ten years he says, “Well, yeah, you guys have changed.” But then he goes to the other excuse, “Well, I believe in evolution and I can’t quite believe the scriptures, and that’s the reason why I cannot become a Christian.” And then we try to do a decent job of explaining the first chapters of Genesis and he sort of halfway believed in our explanation. Now the third excuse is, “Well, the gospel is just to exclusivist. Jesus is the only way and that sounds rather harsh and narrow minded.”

Has this person’s heart been hardened? Has his continued rejection of the gospel despite clear signs of the truth of it, has that led to God hardening his heart? I do not know. Only God knows that. But now this person needs God’s profound grace to bring him out of that. That is what is happening in this passage because the statement that Jesus now makes to confirm them in their hardness of heart is from the perspective of an unbeliever, perhaps the most outrageous statement in all the gospels. He says 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.” Whoa!

It is no wonder that they say this is a hard saying. Who can listen to it? Eat my flesh, drink my blood, that is eternal life. And they say this is a hard saying. Did they imagine that Jesus was advocating cannibalism? Perhaps. But like Nicodemus previously Frank preached in Chapter 3 of John, they had taken a metaphorical meaning for a literal one. And that showed that they were not from above, but that they were from below. Let me close with three statements of reflection on this passage.

First, we have the statement about Jesus being the bread of heaven and eating his flesh and drinking his blood. And some have suggested that what we have here is a misplaced Eucharistic saying. That is to say in reality this statement of Jesus was made when he was instituting his last supper. But the apostle John in order to bring about the overtones of the Eucharist has brought the saying forward to the ministry of Jesus. Some say that this is the case. Others vehemently deny it. Suggesting that these words do not at all have to do with the Eucharist. Both views in my opinion are mistaken.

It seems to me, rather, that the original audience that Jesus was speaking, to that original audience this word had nothing to do with the Eucharist. However, for the readers of the gospel these words were certainly looking forward to the Eucharist. What we have here is dramatic irony. Like we have in Jane Austen or Euripides. We have double level meaning. But this double level meaning is not just a literary thing. It is also a theological thing. The readers of John, us – who believe in his gospel and have received the Holy Spirit, we understand that there was a deeper meaning to the words of Jesus. The flesh and blood that he speaks about are indeed his broken body and his shed blood for our sins.

Secondly, it strikes me in this passage where there is so much talk about bread and people perhaps wanting to take advantage of free food and so forth, I think that perhaps this passage speaks to us about something that has been preoccupying the evangelical church for many years – and that is the issue of social justice. What is the duty of the church? Is it to bring about a better world by health, literacy, education and so on? Or is the duty of the church to preach the gospel? Of course we know that this way of putting the matter is a false dichotomy. We do both. We bring health and literacy and education but we also preach the gospel. But I must confess that amongst a younger generation of evangelicals I think that the issue is becoming somewhat confused.

You see, I’m hearing more and more often that we can go to foreign countries and build things, vaccinate children, teach people to read, and that it is not necessary to preach the gospel. Can we have Christian mission without gospel proclamation? Is it the case that we go and we are a blessing to other people and yet we remain tight-lipped about the gospel and we can call that “Christian mission?” I do not believe so. And in fact if that is what you want to do, you’d be better off going with the United Nations. At least you’ll make more money.

For in this passage, Jesus indeed feeds the crowd. We shouldn’t miss that. He does feed the crowd. He does care for them. But there is also the hard saying. “You must eat my flesh and drink my blood.” Works of charity without the hard saying of the gospel is not Christian mission. I am not saying that we should not perform these acts of mercy, rather the acts of mercy must be accompanied by the hard saying of the gospel. We must give the bread and proclaim the hard saying. What if they reject the hard saying? Do we then withhold the bread? Never. No. You continue to give the bread. And you leave the reception of the gospel to God and the individual. But you continue to give the bread and you continue to preach the gospel.

Finally, I believe that this passage fits very well with the beautiful words of Paul as he says them in 1 Corinthians 1:18. Paul says, “For the word of the cross is folly,” it is a hard saying, if you will. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. But to those who are being saved it is the power of God. For Jews demand signs. Greeks seek wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

In other words, but for those who do not know him it’s a hard saying. For those of us who know him, eating his flesh, drinking his blood, has become a sweet saying of salvation. Amen.

>>Rob Willis:

You’ve been listening to the Beeson podcast; coming to you from the campus of Samford University. Our theme music is by Advent Birmingham. Our announcer is Mike Pasquarello. Our engineer is Rob Willis. And our show host is Doug Sweeney. For more episodes and to subscribe, visit www.BeesonDivinity.com/podcast. You can also find the Beeson Podcast on iTunes and Spotify.