

## SERMON DELIVERED AT THE SUNDAY CONVENTION SERVICE

by

The Rev. Edward J. Worley • St. Luke's Lutheran Church • Seattle, Washington

**Text:** John 6:60-69

Dear fellow-redeemed sinners, ransomed in the blood of our Lord and Savior, God's only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ:

What the Holy Ghost says in our text is not new to you. The doctrine regarding our topic, "Sinful Separatism," is consistently taught among us. Most of you have already heard sermons and essays on the subject over the years. Why do we "repeat ourselves," as it were? We continuously preach and teach, in season and out of season, declaring all the counsel of God because the world, Satan and our own sinful flesh continuously work against us, even as we earnestly contend for the truth of God!

Moreover, Scripture enjoins such constant repetition, as it is written: "*Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip*" (Hebrews 2:1). The word translated here "*slip*" literally means to "run out as from leaking vessels." The world, Satan, and our own internal enemy, our Old Adam, attempt constantly to poke holes in our vessel so that the truth drains out. We must continuously be filled with the truth lest such a scenario leave us empty! With the Apostle, every faithful preacher says: "*To write [or to preach or teach, etc.] the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous; but for you it is safe*" (Philippians 3:1). No faithful pastor finds the task irksome or tedious because he knows how important it is to keep his sheep safe from false doctrine and practice. Ignorance is not bliss, but rather, spiritually life-threatening. Forgetting the truth opens a sheep up to the wolf! True shepherds do not shun to declare to their flocks the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), as Paul the Apostle says: "*That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ*" (Ephesians 4:14-15).

And so we preach the same old doctrine over and over, by the grace and power of God, as we hear this morning:

### **A Probing Question Regarding Sinful Separatism: Jesus Your Only Savior Asks, "Will You Also Go Away?"**

In our consideration of the text before us, we will note that

- I.** The sinful flesh caused many disciples of Christ to take offense at what the Savior was teaching them (vv. 60-63a);
- II.** To be and remain a true disciple of Christ is entirely the result of God's gracious work through His Word (vv. 63b-65);
- III.** When many disciples defected and sinfully separated themselves from Christ and His Word, Christ asked the twelve, "*Will Ye Also Go Away?*" (vv. 66-67); and
- IV.** By God's grace alone may you respond to the Savior's probing question as Peter did (vv. 68-69).

Let us pray: Dear Holy Ghost, God and Lord, work mightily within each heart, through Thy Word, a genuine renewal of faith and love — faith in the truth and love of the same. Most importantly, ever grant each of us sure and certain trust in Christ Jesus and His Gospel words of eternal life to the saving of our souls. Preserve each of us in saving faith unto our end that we may never depart from Thee by taking offense at Thy truth. In our beloved Redeemer's Name, our dear Lord Jesus, Amen.

## I.

Our text begins: *“Many therefore of His disciples, when they had heard this, said, ‘This is an hard saying; who can hear it?’ When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured at it, He said unto them, ‘Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before? It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing’”* (vv. 60-63a).

From the outset, we learn that the sinful flesh caused many disciples of Christ to *take offense* at what the Savior was teaching them. Now we know that the Scriptures foretold that such would be the case. Indeed, the Messiah is even designated the *“Rock of Offense”* in the Old Testament, as it is written in Isaiah 8: *“Sanctify the Lord of hosts Himself; and let Him be your fear; and let Him be your dread. And He shall be for a sanctuary, but for a Stone of stumbling and for a Rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a Gin and for a Snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken. Bind up the testimony; seal the Law among My disciples”* (vv.13-16). To those who, by the grace and power of God alone, believe and have a true, God-wrought Godly fear, trembling at God’s Word, the Savior is a sanctuary, a refuge, and a place of protection. But to those without such trust and fear, Christ is to them a stumbling stone, a rock of offense, a snare. The Holy Ghost says, also through the Apostle Peter: *“Wherefore also it is contained in the Scripture, ‘Behold, I lay in Sion a Chief Cornerstone, elect, precious; and he that believeth on Him shall not be confounded. Unto you, therefore, which believe He is precious; but unto them which be disobedient, the Stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the Head of the Corner, and a Stone of Stumbling, and a Rock of Offence, even to them which stumble at the Word, being disobedient”* (I Peter 2:6-8b). The Lord Jesus Himself said, *“Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me”* (Matthew 11:6). Indeed, since faith is a gift of God, it is the blessing of God not to take offense, but to believe! Genuine God-wrought faith is the key, as the Holy Ghost, through the Apostle Paul, explains in Romans 9: *“What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the Law. For they stumbled at that Stumblingstone, as it is written, ‘Behold, I lay in Sion a Stumblingstone and Rock of Offence; and whosoever believeth on Him shall not be ashamed’”* (Romans 9:30-33; cf. also Luke 2:34; Matthew 21:44).

In our text, many took offense at what Jesus taught. What was it that the Savior taught? The record is right here and may be called *“The Bread of Life Sermon.”* The context is telling. After the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, the next day a crowd sought out the Lord in Capernaum. The record tells us: *“And when they had found Him on the other side of the sea, they said unto Him, ‘Rabbi, when camest Thou hither?’ Jesus answered them and said, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek Me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled. Labor not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of Man shall give unto you; for Him hath God the Father sealed.’ Then said they unto Him, ‘What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?’ Jesus answered and said unto them, ‘This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.’ They said therefore unto Him, ‘What sign showest Thou then, that we may see and believe Thee? What dost Thou work? Our fathers did eat manna in the desert, as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ Then Jesus said unto them, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but My Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He which cometh down from heaven and giveth life unto the world.’ Then said they unto Him, ‘Lord, evermore give us this bread.’ And Jesus said unto them, ‘I am the Bread of Life. He that cometh to Me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on Me shall never thirst. But I said unto you that ye also have seen Me, and believe not. All that the Father giveth Me shall come to Me; and him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out”* (John 6:25-37). The reactions then followed: *“The Jews then murmured at Him because He said, ‘I am the Bread which came down from heaven.’ And they said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How is it then that He saith, ‘I came down from heaven?’”* (vv. 41-42). The Savior continued to reveal His person and work as the only Salvation, to be received by faith alone: *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on Me*

*hath everlasting life. I am that Bread of Life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the Bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the Living Bread, which came down from heaven; if any man eat of this Bread, he shall live for ever; and the Bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world”* (John 6:47-51). Then, this reaction is recorded: *“The Jews, therefore, strove among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’”* (v. 52). The response is simply the same doctrine proclaimed earlier and, indeed, the doctrine that all the prophets witness. *“To Him give all the prophets witness, that, through His Name, whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins”* (Acts 10:43). The Savior once again declares: *“...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. Whoso eateth My flesh, and drinketh My blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me and I in him. As the living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me. This is that Bread which came down from heaven; not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead. He that eateth of this Bread shall live for ever”* (John 6:53-58).

Many took offense at this revelation of Christ’s person and work. They considered it a *“hard saying,”* something too intolerable to accept. They even doubted that *anyone* could accept it, as the rhetorical question indicates, *“Who can hear it?”*

What is also important to note is that Jesus *“knew in Himself”* about the murmuring. This means that, according to His divine omniscience, He *read* the hearts and *knew* the exact thoughts, the internal objections, which they voiced to themselves, as it is written of our Lord Jesus: *“...He knew all men and needed not that any should testify of man; for He knew what was in man”* (John 2:24b-25).

Although we do not have the ability to read hearts, it is very clear that objections start inside, long before they are ever voiced externally. Many a defector admits to having “objections” to doctrine or practice, objections that have festered internally for a long time — even years! Sad to say, if people were only honest and forthcoming when objections first arise, God’s Spirit, working through the Word in the mouth of concerned and admonishing brethren, applied early to the problem, may have prevented a defection! If you are someone with “internal” objections, please do not nurse them into a settled opposition. Ask your pastor for help with your doubts!

But the Savior was able to react *instantly*, for He knew the thoughts and intents of their hearts. He asked them straight out: *“...Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of Man ascend up where He was before?”* (vv. 61b-62). If the revelation of Jesus as God’s Son incarnate, the only Christ and Savior, proclaimed in direct and clear words, caused them to take offense, what would happen when they beheld the risen Savior ascend bodily into heaven as the victorious Lord? Mark well the phrase, *“ascend up where He was before”* (v. 62). The Savior stresses His pre-existence as the only-begotten of the Father, the eternal Son of God! The man standing here teaching them is the Son of the living God, the only Savior! If they take offense at His Word, what shall be their reaction when He is declared to be the Son of God by His resurrection from the dead, as well as by His ascension to God’s right hand of glory and majesty forty days thereafter (Romans 1:4; Ephesians 1:20-23)?

The Savior also revealed their problem, *“It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing”* (John 6:63a). Those who take offense at God’s truth do so according to their sinful flesh, rejecting the quickening power of God’s Holy Spirit. Scripture emphatically states: *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit which is of God, that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God, which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things”* (I Corinthians 2:12-15a). Without God’s Spirit working in the New Man through the Means of Grace, we are unable even to *recognize* spiritual things but are bound to reject them as moronic according to the carnal mind. Many disciples are offended

because they have allowed the *carnal* mind to become their judge in a realm in which the *flesh* has *no ability whatsoever*; yea, it outrightly judges everything *spiritual* to be utter *foolishness*! No wonder they take offense, “*for to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Romans 8:6-8). And they that are in the flesh also find that *God* cannot please *them* in any way, no matter what *He* says or does! For the Old Adam is, and remains unto death, an “intractable, refractory ass” in all spiritual things, as our orthodox fathers rightly label him in our Confessions on the basis of Scripture (Formula of Concord, *Triglott*, Thorough Declaration, VI, 24, pp. 969, 971). The believer recognizes this and, by God’s grace and Spirit through the Word, receives the Word with all readiness of mind in the New Man, saying to the Old Man what the Savior said to Peter when he acted carnally: “...*Get thee behind Me, Satan! Thou art an offense unto Me; for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men*” (Matthew 16:23).

## II.

Yes, to be and remain a true disciple of Christ is entirely the result of God’s gracious work through His Word, as the Savior states in our text: “*The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit; and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not;’ for Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray Him. And He said, ‘Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto Me, except it were given unto him of My Father’*” (John 6:63b-65). Those who, by the grace and power of God through the Word, receive the Word “*mixed with faith,*” receive spiritual life and renewal; “*so then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God*” (Romans 10:17). This is a blessing, a gift from God; “*blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it*” (Luke 11:28b; cf. Luke 10:21-24). The very words that the Savior spoke give spiritual life and vitality; they have quickening power, as it is written: “*For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe*” (I Thessalonians 2:13). Only those gifted with faith in the hearing of the Gospel, which is the very “*power of God unto salvation*” (Romans 1:16), are Christ’s true disciples. We must be drawn to Christ by the Father, as the Holy Ghost works upon our heart through the Word, as our Confessions state: “The Father will not do this without means, but has ordained for this purpose His Word and Sacraments as ordinary means and instruments; and it is the will neither of the Father nor of the Son that a man should not hear or should despise the preaching of His Word and wait for the drawing of the Father without the Word and Sacraments. For the Father draws, indeed, by the power of His Holy Ghost, according to His usual order, by the hearing of His holy, divine Word, as with a net, by which the elect are plucked from the jaws of the devil. Every poor sinner should therefore repair thereto, hear it attentively, and not doubt the drawing of the Father. For the Holy Ghost will be with His Word in His power and work by it; and that is the drawing of the Father. — But the reason why not all who hear it believe, and some are therefore condemned the more deeply, is not because God had begrudged them their salvation; but it is their own fault, as they have heard the Word in such a manner as not to learn, but only to despise, blaspheme, and disgrace it, and have resisted the Holy Ghost, who through the Word wished to work in them....” (Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, XI, 76-78, *Triglotta*, pp. 1087 and 1089).

Those who *take offense* have only themselves to blame for their unbelief. God would draw them, but they will not be drawn! (Matthew 23:37; cf. Acts 7:51; Hosea 13:9). The Savior knew, yea, from the very beginning, that some believed not. Just so, by His divine foreknowledge and omniscience, He knew that He would be betrayed by Judas Iscariot (cf. John 6:70-71). No one is fooling God — hypocrites are only deceiving themselves. The Lord knows them that are His (II Timothy 2:19b).

## III.

Now, despite all the Lord’s sincere efforts to correct and convert them from their carnal thinking, to move them to repent of taking offense at the truth of God, we read the sad result: “*From that time many of His disciples went back and walked no more with Him*” (John 6:66). Many sinfully separated themselves from Christ, going back to their former lives and no longer walking with

Him as true disciples. They refused to be taught of God. Their sinful flesh was entirely to blame, as they leaned on their own understanding and judged the truth to be foolishness!

Scripture foretells that this sad scenario will be epidemic in the last days: *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but, after their own lusts, shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables”* (II Timothy 4:3-4). Sad to say, there will be plenty of preachers giving the flesh what it wants. This indicates that defectors from sound doctrine have only themselves to blame because they deliberately seek out preachers who will pervert the Word of God to suit their fancy! They follow their lusts to fleshly fables — false doctrine that allows or even promotes what they want to do! Many may even *claim* to be following their conscience and doing God service (John 16:2)!

In the face of an epidemic of sinful separatism, the question must be asked: “Will you join the crowd in leaving God’s Truth?” The Savior asked that very question in our text and, thanks be to God, moved Peter to the right answer of the heart: *“Then said Jesus unto the twelve, ‘Will ye also go away?’ Then Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God’”* (John 6:67-69). The Lord’s question is worded in such a way as to anticipate a negative answer. It may be literally translated from the Greek original: “You won’t be going away too, will you?!” Recently many of our congregations have experienced sudden defections on the part of people whom one would never have expected to be separatists, given their former outward profession. So, as pastors, we know that we, too, must ask this straight-forward question of our own people; and we also should expect a negative answer.

But only you, who are professing members of our respective flocks, know what is going on in your hearts right now. As pastors, we cannot help you if you do not come to us and reveal what is troubling you. Unlike the Savior, we *cannot* read hearts. The Eighth Commandment forbids us to act without evidence. Your pastors can only pray God to move you to come to them with your problems. Do not hold these things inside. Your flesh, unchecked by the Law of God, will cause you to take evil advantage of any issue that leads you away from the truth which it abhors. Allow your pastor to be the true watchman over your soul that God Himself intends him to be (Ezekiel 3:17; Acts 20:28)! This is your duty and a blessing to you from God: *“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account; that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you”* (Hebrews 13:17; cf. I Thessalonians 5:12-13).

It is God’s will that you remain in the saving Christian faith! God wants *you* to enjoy the blessings of grace in Christ to the eternal salvation of *your* immortal soul! Our Savior says: *“If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. ...If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed”* (John 8:31-32, 36).

#### IV.

By God’s grace alone may you respond to the Savior’s probing question as Peter did, as our text concludes: *“Then Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God’”* (John 6:68-69). Simon Peter confessed his God-wrought faith in His Lord and only Savior Jesus Christ. On another occasion, *“Simon Peter answered and said, ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered and said unto him, ‘Blessed art thou, Simon bar Jonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven’”* (Matthew 16:16-17). In our text, Peter says *“that Christ,”* affirming that he believed Jesus to be *that* Christ which God had promised, the very Christ that Jesus had described as *“the Bread of Life,”* referring to Himself. Moreover, Peter confessed that Jesus, as God’s Christ, is the only one who has the words of eternal life. There is no one else, no other Divine Prophet. Peter also declared to the Jews after his healing of the lame man: *“Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other Name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

What words of Jesus give eternal life? The Gospel words of the forgiveness of sins (v. 63)! For, as we confess with Luther in the *Small Catechism*, “where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation!” (Sixth Chief Part: “*What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?*”) “*[The Gospel] is the power of God unto salvation*” (Romans 1:16), quickening those “*who were dead in trespasses and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1). “*But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved), and hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:4-9). Indeed, God says to sinners in Colossians 2: “*And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross*” (vv. 13-14). Our spiritual life is the result of God’s grace manifested in the Gospel, which tells us that, for the sake of Christ, all our sins have been paid for and forgiven: “*And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unproveable in His sight, if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled and be not moved away from the hope of the Gospel*” (Colossians 1:21-23a).

May these words of eternal life ever keep *you* with the Lord Jesus; for there is no other Savior, no other salvation (John 14:6)!

*“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen”* (Jude 24-25).

***Soli Deo gloria!***