

The Gospel of John

Session 5

John 6:25—7:52

I. John 6:25-59

1. 6:25-29: The crowd now locates Jesus and it appears that their understanding of him has diminished. When it last met him, the crowd wanted to make him king (6:15) and now it refers to him as rabbi. Jesus offers his own diagnosis of what the crowd is looking for. Its fascination with signs has worn off and now it simply seeks food. (Needless to say, Jesus is not surprised by this.) He now begins a conversation with the crowd that reminds us of his previous conversation with Nicodemus and with the Samaritan woman.
2. The crowd is searching for “the food that perishes” when it should be seeking the “food that endures” (6:27). There is a food which yields eternal life and it is given by the Son of Man (6:27).
3. The Son can give this food because the Father has set his seal of authenticity upon him (6:27). The crowd misunderstands what Jesus says for its question in 6:28 takes it away from what Jesus has said. It seems to have taken the “labor” of 6:27 literally. The “works of God” or those actions pleasing to God are set forth in the Law which is a source of life. But in Jesus, one finds Life (remember the contrast drawn in 1:17). The work that is pleasing to God begins with belief in the Son whom he has sent (who brings Life and Light and to whom the Holy Spirit witnesses).
4. The rest of the discourse will have this theme as its central theme.
5. 6:30-33: The crowd realizes that Jesus is speaking of himself and so asks him two questions: What signs do you do which authenticate your claim? What work of God do you do? They feel confident in trust Moses because he gave their ancestors manna in the wilderness. In 6:31 they cite Exodus 16:4. Within Judaism, this “bread” is understood to refer to the Law. The Law gives life. Can Jesus do something greater? For them, there is nothing beyond Moses and Torah. Can Jesus challenge the unique authority of Moses and can he surpass what Moses gave to Israel? Jesus points out that it was not Moses who gave the bread in the wilderness but God (6:32). Jesus claims to be the “true bread from heaven” (6:32) which gives life to the world. The manna of Exodus 16 is a prefiguration of Jesus.
6. 6:34-40: The crowd clearly misunderstands Jesus for it asks to be given this bread again and again (6:34). Jesus has to make it clear that he himself is the bread of heaven and that he is the once-for-all gift of God. Whoever comes to him/believes in him will find permanent satisfaction (6:35). It is important to note that Jesus speaks in the future tense here. There will be a future moment at which this bread from heaven will be supplied. Jesus emphasizes the complete unity between himself and the Father. Those who come to him (in faith) are given to him by the Father and his will and the will of the Father are one. The will of the Father is that all (note the universal emphasis) who believe in the Son should have eternal life (6:40). The nature of eternal life is hinted at in 6:40. “Eternal life” and “resurrection of the body” mutually qualify one another.
7. 6:41-51: Note that in 6:41 “the crowd” becomes “the Jews”. They raise an objection: How can Jesus claim to be the bread from heaven when his human parents are known? To the extent that one focuses on Jesus’ human origins, one will fail to understand him. In 6:44 Jesus emphasizes his origin from the Father. The Father has sent him and draws people to him. Jesus is speaking of a fundamental shift away from the dynamic of the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, God taught Israel through the Law. Now, the Father draws to himself people from all nations through the Son. In 6:45 Jesus refers to Isaiah 54:13 and claims to be its fulfillment. Through him, all people will be “taught by God”. The status of the Son is

made clear in 6:46. Only the Son knows the Father and so only he can make him known (1:18). Jesus contrasts himself with the manna in the wilderness. Those who ate the manna eventually died; Jesus is the bread who comes down from heaven and makes it possible for one to “live forever” (6:51). 6:51 concludes with a revelation: “And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh”. Note that once again the future tense is used and that the focus is firmly on Jesus. The bread to be given has something to do with his self-offering.

8. 6:52-59: In 6:52 we see that “the Jews” have misunderstood Jesus. In responding to them, Jesus does not say that he is only speaking symbolically or metaphorically. Rather, he emphasizes that he is speaking of his “flesh” and “blood” (6:53). The meaning of what he says has been hinted at in 6:1-14 with its eucharistic overtones. That Jesus is speaking of actual eating become clear in 6:54 where he shifts from using the verb to eat (6:53) to using a verb which means “to crunch with the teeth”. Jesus is not speaking of a “spiritual eating”. The emphasis falls here on both the Word enfleshed and physical nature of Jesus’ death. The separation of flesh and blood is the Old Testament’s idiom of sacrifice and so Jesus is already interpreting his physical death as a sacrifice. Jesus insists that his flesh is “true food” and that his blood is “true drink”. In 6:56 Jesus says that whoever crunches his flesh with their teeth and drinks his blood will live or “abide” in him. It is important to note that believing in Jesus and eating his flesh and drinking his blood are parallel expressions and both convey the idea of a person entering into the life of Jesus. Those who share in the life of Jesus will pass through death to Life. This section closes in 6:58 with another contrast between the manna and Jesus. Once gain (as in 6:49-50), the emphasis falls on the fact that those who ate the manna eventually died but those who feed on Jesus’ bread will be granted to “live forever”. One encounters Jesus’ true food and true drink in the Eucharist which offers the truthful interpretation of his sacrificial death and in which his flesh and blood are sacramentally present.

II. John 6:60-71

1. Since 6:41 Jesus has been addressing “the Jews”. Now, at 6:60 the response of the disciples to what Jesus has been saying is reported. They have seen Jesus’ self-revelation in 6:16-21 and yet some of them find what he has said about himself impossible to accept. Jesus has claimed to reveal God in a way that surpasses Moses and the Law, and some disciples find this impossible to believe. Jesus challenges them with a question: If you saw me ascending to the Presence of God, would this convince you? These disciples are kept from faith by their insistence that their own human standards determine what is possible; they are attempting to measure Jesus with standards which will always fall short. Their outlook is “fleshly” (perhaps better rendered as earth-bound). This outlook is of no value; only the revelation of the Son and the work of the Spirit can result in faith. Ultimately, discipleship is a gift of the Father for it is not information which makes disciples or human desire but the response to the Son made possible by the Spirit given by the Father (6:63-66).
2. At 6:67 “disciples” is narrowed to “the Twelve”. Would they like to leave as well? Peter responds for the group and acknowledge the truth of what Jesus has said in 6:63. The words which Jesus speaks are indeed spirit and life. Peter speaks in 6:68-69 as one who has been led to Jesus by the Father. Peter sees Jesus as “the Holy One of God” and this is only possible because he has been led to the Son by the Father. Faith recognizes that Jesus’ origins are from God. This confession of faith takes place at the same time that a betrayer is mentioned (6:70).

III. John 7:1-9

1. 7:1 indicates that Jesus now confines his activity to Galilee since “the Jews” in Judea are planning to kill him. However, the Feast of Booths has arrived, and it was the obligation of all male Jews to go to Jerusalem to keep this feast.
2. Jesus’ brothers offer counsel which reveals their misunderstanding of him. They advise him to go to Judea so that his works can be seen and so that he can show himself (7:4). They fail to see that Jesus is not simply known by his works and that he has not come to show himself but to reveal God. If Jesus’ brothers are disbelieving, we should think of disbelief as being widely spread.
3. Jesus makes a distinction between “my time” and “your time” (7:6). Jesus and his brothers belong to two different worlds. Jesus’ time is dictated by the Father’s design while the brother’s time is dictated by their own wishes. The “world” (creation corrupted by sin) hates Jesus while his brothers face no such hatred (because they do not challenge it).
4. Jesus announces that he is not going up to “this feast” (7:8). What he does follows the design of the Father and not what others think he should do. This theme appears several times and will appear with particular clarity in chapter 11.

IV. John 7:10-36

1. 7:10-13 completes the preparation for the narrative which follows in 7:14-36. In 7:10 Jesus reverses his earlier decision. Why? John wishes us to conclude that this is due to the Father. Jesus follows the will and prompting of no person (including his mother, as we have seen). He certainly is not guided by the wishes of his brothers.
2. Note that Jesus deliberately goes against the advice of his brothers. He goes to Jerusalem but “in private” (7:10). He does not go in order to show himself. During the feast, “the Jews” are looking for him. Remember in 5:18 “the Jews” were intent on killing him.
3. We get a sense of the popular debate about Jesus in 7:12-13. There is much “muttering” about him with opinion clearly divided. Neither of the opinions mentioned is correct. Jesus is neither a “good man” nor is he leading people astray.
4. Mid-way through the feast, Jesus goes to the Temple to teach. “The Jews” marvel at Jesus and this alerts us to the fact that marveling at Jesus is not the proper response to him. Jesus does not teach with any recognized authority. He has not studied Torah with a recognized teacher and so is wholly suspect (7:15). This allows Jesus to address the issue of his authority.
5. Jesus makes it clear that his teaching is not his own but that of the Father and says that all who genuinely desire to do God’s will will be able to recognize this. A genuine openness to God results in the reception of Jesus. Because Jesus seeks the glory of the Father who sent him, he is to be trusted for there is no falsehood in him (7:18). By implication, there is falsehood in those who reject him (“the Jews”).
6. 7:14-24: “The Jews” claim that their authority derives from Moses who derived his authority from God. Jesus draws a direct line from Moses to himself such that the Law is fulfilled in him. The attempt to kill him can only result from the rejection of God’s will. Thus, Jesus accuses “the Jews” of not keeping the Law (7:19). Note the fundamental argument here: the rejection of Jesus is a rejection of the Law. In 7:20 “the crowd” (distinct from “the Jews”) speaks. It knows of no attempt to kill Jesus and so concludes that he is insane. “The Jews” have rejected Jesus while “the crowd” is still in the process of making a decision. In 7:21 Jesus refers to his action in 5:1-18, an action they marveled at. Jesus then refers to a Jewish tradition which held that it was acceptable to circumcise a male child on the Sabbath because this was a fulfillment of the Law and the completion of the person. Such a thing of life-giving importance overrides the Law. If this is the case, Jesus asks, why do they object to his restoration of a person’s full

potential? The problem, Jesus asserts, is that they judge by “appearances” and this is because they are unable to see the completion of the Law in him. Because of this, all their judgments will be finally wrong.

7. 7:25-31: At 7:25 it seems that a new audience is introduced: “some of the people of Jerusalem”. Whoever these people are, they know of the plot of “the Jews” to kill Jesus. This group marvels at the fact that Jesus is speaking openly and that no attempt is made to stop him (7:26). Significantly, this group knows (or says it knows) that Jesus cannot be the Christ for no one will know where the Christ comes from and they now where Jesus comes from (7:27). In this they are mistaken, for they assume that Jesus’ origin is to be understood humanly. Jesus immediately questions their claim to know where he comes from (7:28). But Jesus goes even further: as they do not know where he is from, they also do not know who sent him. They not only do not know where he comes from, but they also do not really know God. (Ironically, Tabernacles involved the public profession of faith in God and a rejection of all idols.) The Jerusalemites then attempt to arrest Jesus but are unable to since “his hour had not yet come” (7:30). As we have seen, Jesus’ “hour” is the God-appointed time of his crucifixion. In 7:31 another group appears which is identified as “the people”. These people do believe Jesus (or are on the way to doing so). Note that we have now seen four distinct responses to Jesus: the crowd, “the Jews,” the Jerusalemites and “the people”. The response to Jesus is certainly not uniform.

V. John 7:32-53

1. 7:32-36: The Pharisees overhear these opinions about Jesus and apparently are alarmed (because some believe Jesus). Together with the chief priests, they send officers from the Temple to arrest Jesus. He emphasizes that he will be with them a little while and then he will return to the Father. This makes it clear that their plot to kill him will not ultimately succeed. “The Jews” respond to this with incomprehension. They interpret Jesus’ departure in geographical terms (having interpreted his origins in the same way). Once again, the chasm that exists between Jesus and “the Jews” is emphasized. In John’s portrait, “the Jews” are unable to understand Jesus because their presuppositions blind them to the truth.
2. 7:37-52: At 7:37 we arrive at the culmination of Booths or the eighth day. The Feast of Booths involved the pouring out of water in the Temple both as a reminder of the miraculous water in the wilderness and to ask God for adequate rainfall. Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of the Feast of Booths. He is the true source of “living water” (7:38). In Ezekiel 47:1-11 a stream of water flows out of the Temple and imparts life to all that is in its path. Jesus may have this in mind as well. Note that Jesus takes the place of the Temple as the source of the living water. The meaning of this water is specified in 7:39 as the Spirit. As will be made clear later, the gift of the Spirit, expected in the last days (Joel 2:26; 3:1) will be the fruit of Jesus glorification (his death and resurrection).
3. 7:40-44: Once again, Jesus provokes a variety of responses. For some, Jesus is “the Prophet” (Deuteronomy 34:10) while others think that he is “the Christ” (7:40-41). Still others judge that this is impossible since the Messiah is to be a descendant of David and so must come from Bethlehem (7:42). As we have seen, this fails to grasp the fact that Jesus is “from God”. Once again, there is a “division” (7:43). Since Jesus does not fit into Jewish messianic categories, efforts to understand him within them are doomed to fail.

4. 7:45-53: The “officers” were sent out to arrest Jesus in 7:32 and now return to the chief priests and Pharisees in 7:45 without a prisoner. When asked why they have made no arrest, they reply “No one ever spoke like this man!” (7:46). The Pharisees accuse them of having been led astray by Jesus and they note that the “crowd” cannot be trusted to make a proper judgment because it does not know the Law (7:49). For the Pharisees, those who do not oppose Jesus have been, in their ignorance, deceived by him. Nicodemus now reappears (remember 3:1-15) to challenge the Pharisees. Nicodemus says that Jesus may only be judged if one listens to his words and sees his actions. The Pharisees are unwilling to hear this and accuse Nicodemus of being a “Galilean”. They claim that no prophet has come from Galilee (although Hosea and Nahum were from there) and although Jesus was not from Galilee.