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Bridgeway Church
Gospel of John #21
October 27, 2019

Sermon Summary #21

“Eating” and “Drinking” for Eternal Life John 6:47-59

I am constantly amazed by the lengths to which people will go, and the sacrifices they will make, in an effort to cleanse their consciences of the stain and guilt of sin. One example of this is the Ganges River and the pagan beliefs concerning its alleged cleansing and purifying powers.

The Ganges River is 1,569 miles long. It flows through the northern and northeastern area of India, eventually winding its way to the Bay of Bengal.

Every year for centuries, millions of Hindus come to the Indian city of Hardwar on the banks of the Ganges to bathe in its waters. In spite of the fact that the Ganges is widely regarded as the single most polluted river in the world, Hindus believe its waters are both pure and purifying. They wash away the sins of the bather, not just of the present but of a lifetime.

But washing away one's sins in the waters of the Ganges is just one of many beliefs among Hindus. There are numerous other practices they believe are effective in obtaining the forgiveness of one's sins. When the missionary William Carey arrived in India in the late 1700's he was shocked by what the Hindus were willing to do to be cleansed of their guilt.

One day in 1794, Carey and fellow missionary John Thomas were traveling near Malda, India, when they came upon a basket hanging in a tree. An infant had been placed in it and left there to die. The skull alone remained, everything else having been devoured by ants. They later discovered that this act of infanticide had been committed by the child's mother in an attempt to escape the karma-samsara cycle of suffering and endless re-birth or reincarnation.

Carey also discovered that when people were sick, perhaps on the verge of dying, they would be placed alongside the banks of the Ganges, regardless of weather conditions, and left there until they died.

People with leprosy were frequently thrown into a pit and burned to death because of the Hindu belief that a violent end to life purifies the body and guarantees transmigration into a healthy new existence devoid of leprosy. A mere natural death by disease results in four successive rebirths and a fifth as a leper again.

Carey also reported the practice of burning someone alive in order to achieve what they called “eternal happiness.” Custom dictated that when a man died, his widow was to be tied to the funeral pyre and burned alive as her husband's body was being cremated.

Hindu women, both then and now, have been known to pray to the goddess of the Ganges River, pledging that if she were blessed with two children, she would sacrifice one of them to the River. I read one story that occurred only a few years ago of a woman named Alila who stood on the edge of the River, holding her infant son close to her heart. As tears welled up in her eyes, she stepped into the water until it was waist deep. She stood there, silently, for quite a while, and then suddenly tossed the six-month old child into the River to drown.

A missionary came upon Alila as she knelt on the sand, crying uncontrollably and beating her breast. He asked her what was wrong. Through her tears she said: “The problems in my home are too many and my sins are heavy on my heart. So I offered the best I have, my first born son, to the goddess of the Ganges.”

The missionary told her about Jesus Christ and shared the gospel with her, explaining how she could obtain forgiveness through him by faith alone. She responded by saying: “I have never heard that before. Why couldn't you have come thirty minutes earlier? If you had, my child would not have had to die.”

I'm sorry to have begun this message with such distressing and painful images. These are not pleasant things to hear, and we in the western world are largely ignorant of the desperate lengths to which people will go in their vain attempts to achieve eternal life. When I hear stories like these, I marvel at the beauty and simplicity of what Jesus said in John 6:47 –

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

I know how many respond to this. They say, “Oh, come on, man. There's got to be more to it than that.” No, there isn't. He who believes has eternal life.

We cringe and do our best to ignore and forget about the efforts of Hindus in India to find forgiveness and eternal life. But here in America countless millions of people have their own way of dealing with their defiled and guilty conscience. The many ways we have of dealing with it are much more sophisticated. Hardly anyone would object or cringe when they observe how people in our country and in our churches labor to be rid of their sins. Among the many things that are done, thinking that they will atone and wipe clean our souls from the stain of our sins, include:

- Living up to the expectations of family and friends or making mom and dad proud of us by our achievements in the secular world, be they academic or athletic.
- Others seek for forgiveness by putting more money than is expected of them in the offering plate or in the box at the back of the auditorium.
- Some strive for forgiveness by avoidance. That is to say, they make certain that they do not commit a felony or some other scandalous sin, be it adultery or murder or child abuse.
- Many in the church faithfully observe a religious ritual or ordinance, be it baptism or regularly partaking of the Lord's Supper, convinced that such fidelity will impress God to cleanse them of their guilt.
- Then there are those whose confidence about eternal life is based on the fact that they have never taken the Lord's name in vain, or at least they haven't done so since their teen-aged years!
- Or perhaps your avoidance of pornography or your pride in never having smoked or having never been intoxicated or having never indulged in some illegal drug is the basis on which you think your sins are forgiven.

I could go on and on giving examples of what people either do or believe or avoid in their efforts to obtain eternal life. As I said, our practices in the western world would never create controversy like those in India or other places around the globe. Although they are not nearly as gruesome as those things I described just a moment ago, they are just as ineffective and futile in removing the guilt of sin and avoiding the judgment that we deserve.

Over against all such pathetic efforts are the simple and straightforward words of Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). This simple, yet profoundly glorious truth, is repeated over and over again in John's gospel.

- “Whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:15).

- “Whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
- “Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:18).
- “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (John 3:36).
- “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life” (John 5:24).
- “whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).
- “Whoever believes in me, . . . ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’” (John 7:38).
- “whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (John 12:46).
- “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

But, “believe” what? Believe that you are hopelessly lost and condemned apart from the person and work of Jesus Christ; believe that he is who he claimed to be, the second person of the Triune God, the Word, who became flesh, who lived a sinless life that you should have lived but couldn’t, and believe that he died a sacrificial death on the cross that you deserved to die but now don’t need to, and that he rose bodily from the dead and reigns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

In order to drive home his point with as much force and clarity as possible, Jesus made use of a vivid, even offensive, picture or metaphor. He did this to alert the people of his day and us as well to the meaning of his words.

At least up until this point in the narrative of John 6, Jesus hasn’t said anything particularly offensive or off-putting. He calls himself the bread of life and contrasts it with the manna eaten by the people of Israel in the wilderness. As you may recall, there was considerable difficulty in obtaining food during their journey out of Egypt, so God sent food to them from heaven, every day except for the Sabbath day. According to Exodus 16:14, “there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground.” When the people saw it for the first time, they asked: “What is it?” And so it was given the name, “Manna,” which is Hebrew for, “*What is it?*” Again, in Exodus 16:31, we read that it “was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.” This daily gift lasted 40 years and was frequently called “bread from heaven” (Exod. 16:4; Psalm 78:23-25).

Many of the Jews in the days of Jesus also believed that when God sent the Messiah he would once again send Manna from heaven.

If I may be allowed a bit of levity, I often think of how their conversation would have gone as they discussed the Manna, the “what is it” that fell from heaven. If you have ever heard the Abbot and Costello classic routine, “Who’s on first?”, you’ll appreciate my point.

One Israelite says to another: “What is it that you’re eating for breakfast?”
 “Yes, that’s correct.”
 “What’s correct?”
 “I’m having ‘what is it’ for breakfast.”
 “Don’t ask *me* what you’re having. I’m asking *you*, what is it?”
 “Yes. That’s it.”
 “What’s it?”
 “What is it.”
 “What is what is it?”
 “It’s what’s for breakfast!”

Returning to our Lord’s primary point, he tells them: “No, God is not sending again food for you to eat physically, food that would at best only fill your stomachs for a short time. Your fathers ate that food and every morning woke up just as hungry as the day before. And they all eventually died. Instead, God has now sent to you spiritual manna, true bread from heaven, which if eaten brings spiritual life. And *I am that spiritual bread.*”

The point our Lord is making in vv. 47-51 is that he is the bread of heaven sent into the world to bring life and forgiveness and hope. If you will come to him and believe in him and feast on all that God is for us in him, and find your soul’s satisfaction in him, he will raise you up on the last day and you will live forever. This isn’t the first time

he has made this claim. In v. 35 Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

In both instances, the Jewish leaders reacted negatively. We read in v. 41 that they “grumbled about him” for making this claim. They insist that what Jesus *claims* and who Jesus *is* don’t harmonize. In v. 42 they said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” Again, in v. 52, they “disputed among themselves, saying, ‘How can this man give us his flesh to eat?’” In other words, they don’t understand how a mere man can claim to be the bread from heaven that if eaten gives eternal life to other mere men.

In other words, they are saying, “You can’t be from heaven because we know you to be from earth. We know your mom and dad.” Clearly, then, they don’t acknowledge what John has earlier told us: that Jesus is the Word made flesh, that Jesus is God now living as a human being. And as long as any of you today refuse to acknowledge who Jesus is you will likewise react negatively and cynically to what he says.

Now, let’s return to our Lord’s claim that he is the bread of heaven, and that if we will believe in him and eat this bread will never be hungry again. What does this mean?

Satisfied with the Bread of Heaven

It means that he alone is able to satisfy the deepest needs and longings of your soul. Jesus and Jesus alone can satisfy the gnawing hunger of the human heart. Jesus and Jesus alone can quench the agonizing thirst of the human spirit. He and he alone can and will meet every need.

Of course, there is a difference between desires and needs. Jesus doesn’t always satisfy our desires, but he never fails to meet our needs. There is also a difference between real needs and imagined needs. What you and I really need is forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, joy, and hope.

The problem in the world today is that everyone is hungry; everyone is starving, even those of us who live in a country with a constant and abundant supply of food. What we see in countries like Somalia and the Sudan is simply a microcosm on the physical plane of what is true of the entire world on a spiritual plane.

There is a world-wide famine that can’t be solved by human technology or innovative economic policies or the intervention of U.N. troops.

People today, all over the world, are starving for ***meaning***: they feel there is no reason why they exist rather than do not exist.

They are starving for ***purpose***: they experience no lasting satisfaction in what they do; it all seems so futile and fleeting.

They are starving for a sense of personal ***value***: what difference does it make that I am here and what difference will it have made once I’m gone?

They are starving for ***love***: does anyone really care about me, about who I am and what I do, or is their interest in me purely a selfish one?

They are starving for ***truth***: they don’t know any more who is lying, or whom to believe, or whom to trust.

They are starving for ***peace***: all they experience is unrest and striving and turmoil.

They are starving for ***joy***: they are by and large miserable, depressed, and unhappy.

They are starving for ***hope***: hope that there is more to their existence than 70 or 80 years of life on earth.

They are starving for ***forgiveness***: they hunger to know their sins are forgiven and to experience a permanent sense of being clean.

And when people are this hungry, they will eat anything, no matter how badly it tastes or how sick they become. What is your emotional and spiritual food today? Your is your mental food today? What are you ingesting and feeding on in hope of getting and enjoying life? The world in which we live is one giant fast-food chain. It offers a wide variety of whatever you think you need to make life work. If you can't find it in one group, there's another around the corner. If you can't find it in one political party, the other will step up to offer you life. If you can't find it in one system of truth and ethics, there are plenty of others waiting to satisfy your soul.

The Jewish leaders were confused by it all. They simply couldn't make sense of it. They were much like that little boy who attended with his parents a performance of the Nutcracker. After watching the dancers on their toes, he turned to his mother and asked: "Why don't they just get taller girls?"

To help them get a handle on what he's saying, Jesus makes use of a graphic image. We read about it in vv. 53-58. He says it over and over again to drive home the point:

"unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (v. 53).

"whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (v. 54).

"whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (v. 56).

Many think that Jesus is here referring to the elements of the Lord's Supper and that by partaking of the bread and drinking from the cup they gain eternal life. I'm not convinced, and here is why. Look closely at the obvious parallel between John 6:40 and John 6:54.

"everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (v.40).

"Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (v. 54).

This tells me that *eating and drinking is a graphic metaphor of believing*. We do this all the time in our own unique way. We speak of devouring books and drinking in every word and swallowing stories and chewing over a matter and eating our own words. In other words, terms of ingestion are often used to mean receive or to take inwardly and to believe and enjoy.

Just as we saw a parallel between vv. 40 and 54, we also see a parallel between v. 35 and v. 51.

"Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst'" (v. 35).

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever" (v. 51).

Does it not strike you as evident that coming to Jesus and believing in Jesus and eating the bread of life are all synonymous ways of saying the same thing? To eat his flesh and to drink his blood is simply a graphic way of saying, "You must come to me and believe what I've done for sinners by giving up my flesh and blood on the cross." Of course, believing is more than merely giving intellectual assent to the truth about Jesus, in the same way that eating is more than merely ingesting. *Eating is enjoying. Eating is savoring. Eating is trusting and treasuring. Eating is finding your soul's sole satisfaction in Jesus.*

There are two things that result from coming to Jesus and believing in Jesus and spiritually ingesting Jesus.

First, you receive eternal life. We see this in vv. 33, 39-40, 44, 47-51, 57-58. His promise to us is that although we will die physically, we will be raised in glory and honor to share with him in his kingdom rule in the new creation.

Second, it results in life-transforming union with God in Christ. This is the point he makes in v. 56 – “Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” His life comes into us and ours into him.

Conclusion

Are you hungry? Do you long to fill your spirit and to cleanse your soul and to know that you have eternal life? What are you doing to satisfy this relentless craving of your heart? Don't think that by bathing in a particular river that anything will come of it. Don't ever think that by sacrificing your child you will atone for your sins. The only sacrifice that avails for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life is the sacrifice the Father made of his Son on the cross for you and for me.