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Teaching: Carlon Tschetter
Series: The Gospel of John
Message: Feeding on Christ

Transcribed Message
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John 6:48-59

It was the beginning of the 16th century that marked the beginning of the Great Reformation. The Great Reformation, I suppose, officially began in 1517 when Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg. But it was that occasion and that great climactic event in the history of the church that marked the opposition to the church of Rome, and it really set forward what we know today as Protestantism. As the Reformers, Calvin and Luther and Zwingli, put forward their differing views with the church of Rome, they did so in such a way to say about several things. We believe that the final authority is to be found in the Word of God. It's not to be found in the church, it's not to be found in a man. We believe that salvation is by faith alone, sola fide, the great doctrine of the Great Reformation, justification by faith alone, not as the Church of Rome taught that it is a matter of works and human effort. Certainly, the priesthood of the believer was one of the great doctrines that these great Reformers all were united on. But for all their unity on these and many other important points, there was one point, which they not only disagreed with the church of Rome, but they ended up also disagreeing with each other. And it had to do, of course, with what we know today as the Lord's Supper. It has to do with what maybe in your tradition of growing up, you refer to it as the Eucharist or maybe as communion as we commonly refer to it. Much of that debate and much of that discussion was drawn out of John 6 and the verses that we're going to look at this morning.

So, let's turn there this morning again, and this is what we want to see. In verses 48 through 59, Jesus is the one who brings life to us because He, in fact, is the one who gave His life on our behalf. We're going to do a quick review of all 47 verses to this point because when we come to verse 48, we really need to set up these verses by understanding the context. We will be hopelessly lost if we disengage from the rest of this chapter. Remember, this is the chapter in which Jesus puts forth the first of the great I am's and says, I am the bread of life. In

that first reminder, we see that this whole chapter centers around the miraculous feeding. And, again, you get into the discourse that we look at this morning and if you disconnect that with the beginning of this chapter you're going to be hopelessly lost. So, we must keep in mind the larger context, which was Jesus' feeding of these 15,000 people and all that that meant and all that that indicated. That helps us to understand what we look at this morning.

The second point is that this miracle of the feeding of the 15,000 plus connects us back to Exodus chapter 16. And the expectation, remember, out of the book of Deuteronomy was that when the Messiah came, He was going to provide for the needs of God's people. He was going to, again, bring bread down from heaven. This is very much a part of the story that unfolds and the teaching that Jesus gives.

And then, thirdly, we, of course, have seen the hard sayings of Jesus. And those hard sayings, I suppose, could be summarized by remembering that Jesus said, not everybody is going to come. Not everybody is going to believe. Those who come and those who believe are going to be the ones that the Father is gifting to the Son. And those that are being gifted by the Father to the Son are not going to come just of their own accord. They're not just going to wake up one day and say, I want to be a Jesus follower. They are going to, Jesus said, be drawn by the Father, which we know further is the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing conviction and drawing us and opening our eyes.

And then, of course, those who come receive eternal life and are eternally secure. So, in verse 41, after that series of hard sayings, we read that they grumbled about Him. What happens any time there are hard teachings and hard sayings? There's a murmur. There's a grumbling, isn't there? Well, it wasn't any different there. And in the lesson this morning, there's going to be some more hard sayings and there's going to be some more grumbling at the end of it, which we'll see, Lord willing, in a future lesson. So, let's look this morning. I'm going to go back and read again, and you'll understand why in just a moment. I'm going to read verses 53 and 54, and then we'll proceed.

So, Jesus said 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. So, I've just characterized this as

flesh and blood, but here's what I want to do. I want to literally begin this morning with a parenthesis. I want to begin with a little bit of a pause. We're not going to jump right into the exposition of these verses. We'll get to that. But what I want to do is I want to start with a historic background of these verses and what has been drawn out of these verses, largely by the Roman church, but the others we'll expand as well. So, let's do that.

Let's think together of the four views of the Lord's Supper, the four views of the Eucharist or of communion as they have been put forward down through the centuries. Unfortunately, especially verses 53 and 54, but others that are in here as well, have been used to teach something that I hope we'll see before we're done this morning that Jesus never intended to be taught. Now, I understand that there are a good number of you that have grown up in the Roman church and Catholicism was a part of your background. And so, I want to be gracious in these comments, but I also want to be true to Scripture.

When the church of Rome comes to this passage, they put forward their view of the Eucharist, their view of the Lord's Supper, and they call it transubstantiation. Now, that's a big word, but you can break it down simply and see that the prefix "trans" simply means change. Substantiation is just the idea of substance, so that there is a change in substance. And so, for centuries, the church of Rome has taught that when the priest takes the elements, the host, and he lifts them to heaven at the beginning of the mass and the celebration of the mass, that the elements literally and are transformed into the literal body and the literal blood of Jesus. So, that is transubstantiation. The elements, the physical elements of the bread and the cup, literally become the literal body and blood of Jesus.

Well, if that were a reality, then the church, of course, teaches with that then you are imbibing, you are receiving and taking in the very grace of God because of that transubstantiation truth. And so, it becomes an essential part of salvation. The Roman Church very clearly teaches that you have no pathway to heaven apart from the Eucharist and apart from the mass because it is the very receiving of the grace of God. It's the very reception of the literal body and blood of Jesus. Now, we don't have time to critique all that position but suffice it to say that we understand that Jesus in His humanity is in heaven. Jesus in His humanity does not leave the glory of heaven every time there's the celebration of the Eucharist and come

physically to the earth and be a part of this transformation. It also, of course, needs to be said that this very understanding lifts the elements themselves to almost a point of idolatry, that this is the literal body and the literal blood of Jesus. So, the elements take a focus that I don't think the Scriptures ever would have intended for them to take. And then, of course, we'll speak to it again in a little bit. But just the sense of finality of what Jesus did on the cross is very much called into question.

Well, Luther disagreed with that view, and he didn't totally disagree with it. He just disagreed with it somewhat. And so, the Lutheran view, if you grew up in the Lutheran tradition, then you're familiar with the word consubstantiation. It wasn't transubstantiation, but now it is consubstantiation. The prefix "con" simply means with or together. And honestly, in a view of communion and the Lord's Supper and Eucharist that I'm not sure anybody can fully explain or understand, Luther said in this view that Jesus is somehow in, with, and under the elements. It's not a literal transformation, but somehow Jesus is in, with, and under. And so that was Luther's view.

Well, Calvin disagreed with both, and Calvin put forward the view that we today would think of as the Reformed view, and it is the spiritual presence view, or maybe even the real presence. So, there's no transformation, per se, that takes place, but there is some sense in which there is the mystical presence of Christ. Mystical not in a bad way, but mystical simply in the spiritual, special sense. And so, the elements hold significance in such a way that there's not transubstantiation, there's not consubstantiation, but there's something that transpires in the act of the Eucharist and the celebration of communion that invites the spiritual presence of Christ in a special way.

And then the last view, Zwingli, he disagreed with all of them, and Zwingli put forward the view that we call the memorial view. The memorial view simply recognizes that communion is an act of remembrance. It's an act of remembrance. Jesus said, do this in remembrance of me.

Well, here's the thing that I want you to see. Jesus' words in John 6, I don't think, have anything to do with any of this, not in a specific direct sense. Now there's certainly a corollary, as we're going to see before we're done, but I don't think Jesus in John 6:53 and 54, or any of

these other verses, is referring in any way to any of these views that have been put forward and let me suggest to you why I say that.

First, the whole matter of the Lord's Supper hadn't even been instituted in terms of the time frame that we're in in John 6. The Lord's Supper isn't going to be introduced until the night that Jesus is betrayed. Just in terms of the chronology of the Gospels, we're at least a year away from Jesus taking from the Passover celebration and investing in the Passover celebration a totally new meaning for the New Covenant and the Christian faith. This Jewish audience that is listening to Jesus say these words in John 6. If you said to them, do you know he's talking to you about something called the Lord's Supper? They would have no idea what the Lord's Supper was. It had never even been introduced. So, it stretches incredulity to think that there is any way that that would be happening.

If I were to say to you, where would you turn in your Bible to learn more about communion, to learn more about the Eucharist, to learn more about the Lord's Supper? Well, somebody would surely say Matthew 26. Somebody would say Mark 14. Somebody would say Luke 22. Because those are the Gospel accounts. When we get to that point where the Lord's Supper is instituted, where Jesus speaks of this very reinvestment in the Passover celebration, then hopefully somebody would say 1 Corinthians 11. Because in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is teaching and giving to the church instruction about this very celebration. We'll read that later on this morning. So, the Lord's Supper hasn't even been introduced.

Secondly, the Lord's Supper is a proclamation of Christ's death. It's not a reenactment. And I think this is so very important. Jesus died once for all. In the Catholic mass celebration, there is in a sense in which Jesus is offering himself again, and again, and again, and again, and again for the sins of God's people. And that simply is almost blasphemous. It just is so contrary to Scripture. The writer of Hebrews says Jesus offered himself once for all. Jesus said it is finished. It's never to be done again because the work was so effective and so complete. So, there is no sense in which the body and blood of the Lord are being offered again.

And then this point, which I think is just the final of why this has been misunderstood, the language, the language is absolute. There's no qualification in the words that Jesus speaks. If, in fact, this John 6 passage should some way be distorted to be speaking about the Lord's

Supper, then it alone is required for salvation. That's the way that John has presented the truth to us. He has spent five chapters and 47 verses telling us that what we need to do to have eternal life is to believe. He hasn't said anything at all for five chapters and 47 verses about the need to participate in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper.

Look at verse 35. 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. He doesn't say in verse 35, if you eat the sacrament, you'll never be hungry again. If you take part of the Eucharist, you have eternal life. He doesn't say anything about that at all. In fact, what he says in verse 35 is believe and you have eternal life. Believe and you'll never be hungry in that spiritual sense again, right?

So, let's leave the history, and let's step into the exposition of these verses. We're going to move through them because here is the teaching of our Lord. Right at the front end, I simply say this to you. There's nothing in these verses this morning, as challenging as they are, and in some respect, as hard as sometimes they are to read, there's nothing in these verses that is new. This is Jesus coming to the end of his discourse and summarizing everything that he has said before this.

Notice again the immediate connection to the Old Testament in verses 48 through 50. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that no one may eat it and not die. Ten times in this section, in this discourse, Jesus talks about the fact that he's the one who has come down from heaven. And he's tying that back to the Old Testament story of Exodus 16 and the manna by which God fed and cared for his people.

In doing that, he's underscoring these two things. And honestly, if we get these two things, we've got it. The two things that Jesus is zeroing in on, number one, their interest, these people that he's speaking to, their interest is in the physical over the spiritual. Their interest is in the physical over the spiritual, and their interest because of that is in the lesser rather than the greater. And that's the point that Jesus is making, especially in verses 48 through 50. It's a picture. Exodus 16 is a picture of the staggering cost of unbelief because that's what characterized the Old Testament Jews in that framework, in that time period. They were walking in unbelief even during God's amazing provision.

Jesus says, you know what? They ate and they died. That sounds kind of depressing, doesn't it? They ate and they died because what was provided for them in the manna was a provision for this life only. And that's what they were consumed with. That's what they were focused on. Their interest and their focus was in the material. Their interest and their focus was not in the spiritual. Their interest and focus was in the lesser, not in the greater. My friends, this is just simply a picture, this is a picture of the heart of humanity. This is the tendency that we are all pulled to live in, this giving up the greater for the lesser. This focus on the material when God has so much more for us regarding the spiritual.

You see this storyline all through Scripture. One of the most dramatic pictures of this story is in the example of Esau. And remember, Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Then you get to the book of Hebrews, and the writer of Hebrews says he despised his birthright. And we say, man, that's harsh. That's kind of hard to say Esau despised his birthright. I mean, the man was hungry. Give him a break. That's not the story. The point of the story is that's what Esau focused his life on. He focused his life on the physical. He focused his life on the material. He focused his life on the lesser. And God had so much more. He was the firstborn son. He was in line to bring the blessing of God's covenant through his family line. He gave it all up because all he cared about was the physical. All he cared about was the material. It is a tragic thing.

Jesus is constantly trying to reorient our thinking. This is Romans 12, right? The transformation of our mind, but here it's Jesus bringing us back and saying, look at your life. What is it that you see that is dominating your life? Jesus wants us to step into that which is greater. He wants us to step into that which is the spiritual, right? He wants us to experience true life, abundant life. He wants us to experience what it means to eat the spiritual bread that he promises and that he brings to us, the riches that he has for us. What the world offers us never satisfies. What the world offers us always leaves us wanting more. I don't care what you look at in our world, whether it's the approbation of men and the praise of men and the matter of popularity, or whether it's addictive behaviors or whether it's the pursuit of the lust of the flesh and the pride of life. Pick any of them and it's the same thing over and over and over. People who give themselves to that wake up every morning unhappy and unsatisfied because it never fulfills and it never achieves what only God can give to us.

So, Jesus, what is the answer? What is the answer? They ate their manna, and they died. What more do you have for us? Jesus in this next group of verses, this startling language tells us, and boy, does he tell us! In verse 51, I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

Now, understand at the beginning of this section, we're talking in metaphors. We treat the Bible literally, but when we come to a metaphor, we understand it's a metaphor. This is a metaphor. Jesus says to us he's going to take something physical and he's going to invest in it that which is spiritual. That's a very common thing that we see often in Scripture. Just as the manna came down from heaven and physically supplied the need of the people, so Jesus said, I have come down. I'm the bread of life. I'm alone able to meet your spiritual needs.

John 6 could be called the bread chapter, right? There are 20 times to this point that Jesus or John have talked about bread. But it's not just the bread chapter, it's the believed chapter. And that's the other thing that, of course, we see here. Jesus is answering the question, how can I have my hunger satisfied? How can this deepest longing of my soul, this hole, this emptiness, this matter that Augustine said, Oh Lord, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you. How do we fill that hole? That's what Jesus is answering. And he says in answer to that question, I'm the bread of life. I'm the only one who can satisfy. I'm the one who can meet the longings of your heart.

Verse 52 is a miss. They miss it again, don't they? The Jews then disputed among themselves. So, he just gives them this amazing truth that he's again the bread of life. The Jews then disputed, verse 52, among themselves saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? The word disputed is a very strong word. You almost get the picture that these people were coming to blows with each other in discussing this teaching that Jesus is giving them.

Remember though, in John's gospel, John loves to give us these snapshots of people misinterpreting what Jesus says, right? So back in John 2, you tear down this temple and in three days I'll rebuild it. And they're like, you are out of your mind. We have spent 40 years building this temple. We're not done yet. There's no way. Of course, he was talking about his physical body, wasn't he? Death and resurrection.

Nicodemus, the same thing. You've got to be born again. This guy's trying to figure out what in the world is Jesus talking about. I can't do this over again. John 4, the woman at the well, her heart has this huge hole in it that she's tried to fill with six or seven men, and it hasn't worked yet. Jesus offers her water and she's like, you don't even have a bucket to pull the water up. The gospel of John, he's continually showing us how people are missing the spiritual by focusing on the physical. They're missing the greater by constantly focusing on the lesser. That's exactly what's happening here.

These Jews know the law well. They know the law doesn't allow them to even eat anything with blood in it, let alone drink somebody's blood. I mean, it's an abhorrent thought. It would have been revolting to them. That's why this language is so startling, and we'll touch on that in a moment. They knew that Jesus wasn't suggesting to them some act of cannibalism in which they were going to somehow eat his body. D.A. Carson says this, any dullard could see Jesus was not speaking literally. No one would suppose Jesus was seriously advocating cannibalism and offering himself as the first meal. No, of course not. They're confused. They don't know exactly what he's talking about, but they know he's not talking about that.

So, we come to the text again and what do we say? Jesus help us, help us out, help us understand this. And he does in verses 53 to 59. Now here's a part of what I think is happening, because Jesus knows the hearts of these people and he knows their resistance to everything that he's offered them to this point. How they just purposely seem to focus only on the physical. That's why there are banners hanging around Capernaum, Jesus for King, because they have found a man who can fill their stomach with food, and they think that's what life is about.

I think Jesus, because he's dealing with the hardness of heart, speaks these startling words. He speaks these words that honestly when we read them they're just revolting. There's something about this matter of eating his flesh and drinking his blood that causes us just to say, why do you have to use this language? And I think he uses this language to unsettle them and break them out of their materialistic, physical, lesser world that this is the way that he does it.

So, I say to you that in verses 53 and 54, what Jesus is saying is he's just pressing into the heart of the gospel. He's pressing into the heart of the gospel and he's speaking about salvation. And he states it negatively and he states it positively. In verse 53, so Jesus said 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. he's going to start off and he's going to state it negatively and he says at the beginning of this, truly, truly. Remember, pay attention, pay attention. This is important. This is what I want you to see. And what does he do? He points them ahead to the cross. That's literally what's happening here.

In verse 52, when the Jews disputed among themselves saying, how can this man give us his flesh to eat? In what sense, in what way did Jesus offer his flesh? Where did Jesus offer his flesh ultimately? It was on the cross. His flesh is representing the very reason of the incarnation. God becoming man so that he could pay the penalty for sin. He offers himself. He offers his flesh literally on the cross in payment for sin. If there is an imagery here, the imagery is not the Lord's Supper. We already said that. It hasn't even been instituted. The imagery is what? The imagery is drawn out of the Passover. It's in the Passover that Jesus is going to pull these elements and reinvest them with New Covenant truth.

It is introduced to us in John 1, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We went right by it without even paying probably any attention to it. At the beginning of this chapter, the bread chapter, the belief chapter, the chapter with the startling language, you know what it says in verse 4? And this was the season of the Passover. Now John didn't just drop that in there to fill up a verse line. He dropped it in there because he's setting up the discourse that Jesus gives about being the bread of life and being the one who offers himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus says, unless, unless. Truly, truly, I say to you. unless you do this, right? And the words eat and drink, those verbs are in what we call the aorist tense, which means they're looking at a point of time. They're looking at a point of time. What happens at a point of time? You believe that Jesus is the Son of God. You believe that Jesus is the Christ. You believe that his death on the cross was made in payment for your sin. I think he's pointing to the cross and in saying you need to eat and drink, it's just another way of saying you need to believe. You need to believe.

There's a point in time when the Holy Spirit so opens your previously closed eyes that now you see the glory of the gospel and you understand. you believe and you trust. That's what

he is saying here. It really is the moment of belief that is in view. Augustine said, to believe is to have eaten. To believe is to have drunk. To believe is to have received the element of the body of our Lord in the sense of his provision on the cross.

Now, look at this. That's necessary for eternal life. That's what he says. That's how you receive eternal life. You eat. You drink. Metaphorically, he's speaking of believing, of coming, of hearing the gospel and responding to it, but he's not done. So that speaks of salvation.

Now look at the second point. Feeding on Jesus is sanctification. There are both here. There's salvation and there's sanctification wrapped in this metaphorical language of feeding on Jesus, of feasting on Jesus. Look at verse 55. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever drinks on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him. As the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me he also will live because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate and died. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. Now the verb tenses change to the present. Eating and drinking in the previous verses, aorist tense, point in time, belief for salvation. Now we're stepping out of salvation and we're stepping into sanctification. He's talking about our daily walk. He's talking about what we sang, abiding in Christ, right? If you abide in me and my words abide in you, it's our union with Christ. It's looking ahead to John 15 and the whole passage on the vine and the branches. The present living of verse 57 is the truth of Galatians 2:20. I'm crucified with Christ. Yeah, that's true. Nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. He's talking about how we walk daily and feed on Christ.

How do we walk daily and take in and savor and enjoy all that God has for us? Listen, it's very simple. The metaphor that he puts forth is eating and drinking. There is a moment of time when we do that, when we trust Christ for salvation. But as you have received Christ Jesus, so walk in him, Paul says in Colossians. It's this daily walking, isn't it? This daily feasting, this daily eating, this daily drinking.

What does that implication look like? Well, he is our daily bread. He is our daily bread. The psalmist said, taste and see that the Lord is good. Just look at this analogy. You eat to live.

You eat to sustain your physical body. You need to eat daily to sustain and grow and be transformed spiritually. Why do you suppose the church is so full of anemic, weak, ineffective believers? Because they're not feasting on Christ daily. They're not sustained daily on the nourishment of God's Word and the Spirit of God bringing that truth into our life. They're not savoring and enjoying Jesus in that way. We think about how often we do it. We do it three times a day and a hundred times in between those three times, right? Nobody says, when we're done with community group this morning at 12 o'clock, nobody's going to say to another person, I'm not going to eat lunch today. I did that last week. Nobody's going to do that. That's not the way. We know we have to be sustained daily and so we do it often. There's a regular feeding, a regular feasting on Christ.

It's personal. Nobody can do it for you. Do you ever think about the fact that you could sit down at the table filled with all this food watching all these other people eat and it does you no good at all? You have to participate, don't you? You have to take it in. You have to bring that Word and that truth into your life and you know what?

Here's the best news of all. You really can't overeat on this. You can just go for it, right? You can have seconds and thirds of dessert and you just go for it. It's unlimited. Eating and drinking is simply savoring and enjoying and trusting Jesus. It's being satisfied with Jesus.

My friends, the world's message is a message that you can never be satisfied because what the world offers you will never fulfill and meet your deepest longings and needs. Only Jesus can do that. Only the Holy Spirit bringing that Word into your life daily can do that.

What do we take away? Salvation does not come to us through ritual but through righteousness. The righteousness not of ourselves, but a righteousness that is through Christ alone. Let me ask you before we come to communion, do you know what it means to have the righteousness of Christ in your life? In other words, is there a point in your life where you have put your trust and your faith in Jesus alone? Where God showed you just the emptiness and futility of life in such a way that you called out to him and said, I believe. I believe that what Jesus did, he did for me. I believe that I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and I believe that what Christ has done is all that needed to be done. That's the offer of the gospel.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, hard words from our Lord but so needed, so essential, so helpful ultimately to us to understand what it is to feast on Christ, what it means to savor and enjoy our walk with you because you truly alone, Lord Jesus, are the bread of life that can satisfy the deepest longings of our heart. Father God, I pray that by your Spirit you will open hearts to this glorious gospel. We look forward to sharing in these elements of the bread and the cup, reminding us of all that Jesus has done for us. In Christ's name we pray, amen.