

John 6:51–69

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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The texts for this Sunday cleave a sharp distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous, but Jesus eats right through the distinction to feed us on himself and free us.

We have been taught in recent years to be very suspicious of such distinctions. These are the kinds of things that happen among the low-church folk, the Baptists and the Assemblies of God and so forth, where there's a clear sense of in and out, the saved and the unsaved. Those of us who have migrated upward into the middle class and think of ourselves as the near equivalent of the Episcopalians (what a joke) don't like to talk about the righteous and the unrighteous. We'd rather blur these lines and leave an open question.

And of course there's some good reason for that. There are problems on both sides. Those who consider themselves just turn out, upon closer examination, to be considerably less than that. And when you start hanging around the unrighteous, they turn out to be a lot more fun and generally a lot more reliable. I think almost every pastor has had the experience of coming into a crisis in the congregation and discovering that those who have been in the front row in leadership have disappeared, and those generally regarded as the unwashed and the unclean turn out to be the most reliable of all, spectacularly so. So even if it is a matter of class, there is some sense to the suspicion. When people start dividing so clearly, you wonder whether something else is at stake.

Still, our texts insist on this: you have to recognize the difference between the righteous and the unrighteous. They are so insistent that if we let Scripture do what it normally does, which is to challenge our assumptions, we may discover that our desire to evade this distinction has a lot to do with the sloppy kind of antinomianism, really the *anomia*, that has taken over the ELCA, particularly as it has moved into a new class of people and so wants to avoid taking a stand. Find me a congregation where the commandments have been taught in the last ten or fifteen years to anybody but a group of confirmands. It's pretty unusual anymore. People even find the commandments strange.

Gustaf Wingren, my old teacher, used to use a Swedish word for this kind of thing. He said it was like slush, the mixture of rain and snow that lies on the ground in the spring, getting dirtier and dirtier. It doesn't water anything. The only thing it's good for is slipping and sliding and falling on your keister. So there is a kind of ethical slush that resists these distinctions, and we have to be careful. We are coming to the edges of ourselves here, the edges of our own culture, and the edges of the church most of us left just a little while ago. So we'd better watch ourselves.

So first we are going to take a close look at the supporting texts, which set down the distinction. Proverbs 9 and Psalm 34 speak with one voice, and we can get the groundwork done there. Ephesians 5, predictably, treats the matter with quite a bit more complexity, and we'll look at that next. And then the real proviso to this distinction is set in the gospel text.

We're on our third week now of John 6. I've always loved these summer adventures with John 6. These are very difficult, challenging texts, and it's challenging to sit through three in a row, having already heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand from Mark. But we're going to go back to it once more, because this is the most challenging one of all. "Out of the eater came something to eat," and it turns out that he is the one to be eaten. Eat me, Jesus says. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." And then, typically, he spins that promise right at you, so that you wind up opening your mouth and swallowing it whole. Good as it gets.

Proverbs 9 and Psalm 34: The Wise and the Scoffer

So we'll start with these supporting texts, tough as they are, and see if we can't do something. First, Proverbs 9:1–10 and Psalm 34:12–22 take the hardest line. The wisdom sayings in Proverbs 9 appear quite a bit gentler. I always think of the author of Proverbs as a laid-back pastoral counselor wearing a blue leisure suit and carrying a manual of the latest advice for the upwardly mobile, the nine or eleven or seven or whatever it is habits of highly successful people. The author of Proverbs enjoys working on himself, and so his treatment of this is a little gentler, until you start examining it closely, and then you discover yourself standing in a pool of your own blood.

Wisdom invites you to stop by, and Wisdom promises good company. "Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars. She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine; she has also set her table." It sounds like a wonderful banquet. "She has sent out her young

women to call from the highest places in the town.” It’s getting a little better for us males here. “‘Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!’ To him who lacks sense she says, ‘Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Leave your simple ways, and live.’” It sounds very inviting, and there is no evidence of much of a line until we get to the last verses of the lesson.

It really starts in verse 7: “Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.” She invites gently, with all the manners of Emily Post, and sets her table with all the latest and most fashionable things, as though you were sitting down to eat in *Better Homes and Gardens*. And as you sit down to eat in this Better Homes and Gardens atmosphere, you think you’re finally free. But then the discussion turns to the scoffer, and you discover that you are the topic of conversation.

This is the way it goes. “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will increase in learning. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” So there are the wise and the foolish, the scoffers and the appropriately humble, and the two of them really don’t mix. There’s inside, there’s outside, and there’s trouble for anybody on the outside.

It is better to be wise than to be simple; certainly that’s true. It is better to accept correction than to argue about it. My pastor out in Oregon always says that a pastor who defends himself gives it away right away. If you accept correction, you’re way better off. So it’s true, but it is also possible to have a little too much invested in this line.

Psalms 34 takes the same line and is even straighter. If you want to do well, keep the commandments. “Who among you loves life and desires long life to enjoy prosperity? Keep your tongue from evil-speaking and your lips from lying words. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.” But to the unrighteous: good luck. And so now we get a whole set of beautiful promises made to the righteous, with the unrighteous and the unwashed and the unwanted left on the outside looking in.

Well, it’s certainly true. If you obey the commandments, even if you follow the 85 percent rule and basically keep them, that’s good for you. You’ll do better. Pay your bills, and those wicked collection agencies don’t call you up. If you don’t, they start making friends with you on the

telephone, sounding very much like the fellow who wrote Proverbs at first, and then sticking in the knife.

Well, here we go. There is a line between the obedient and the disobedient. “He will keep safe all his bones; not one of them shall be broken. Evil shall slay the wicked, and those who hate the righteous will be punished.” There you go. I guess the jig is up. So work on yourself, achieve, keep growing in holiness, and you will be able to identify the unrighteous in town and take it from there.

Roughly, that’s true. If you obey the commandments, you’ll do better. But when it becomes invested as an eternal principle, it turns to evil. Then we start separating the weeds from the wheat. We learn who the righteous are, we pretty much know who the unrighteous are, and we can separate them all out and send them away, while advertising our tolerance for anybody and everybody and being basically oblivious to our own intolerance.

Ephesians 5: Walk as Children of Light

Now Ephesians is quite a bit more sophisticated. When we come into Ephesians, we start seeing some of the same talk, but this time it has been shot through with grace.

There is a bright line between good and evil. In verses 3 and 4, before the text begins, there’s quite an interesting discussion of fornication, greed, and disobedience. And you know the consequences. It is now said, since the AIDS epidemic, that a person who commits adultery with another takes on that person’s whole sexual history, all the lovers they’ve ever had. You start carrying a whole lot of people around on your back. It is evil, and it’s a hard way to live.

So if we begin there and go into the verses of the text, we can see what is being said. “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” It is not as though God sits in the heavens flicking his finger at those who disobey him. Rather, it’s built into things. There are consequences of human behavior that carry themselves out in us, in spite of our tolerance and openness and eagerness to embrace those who are different.

“Therefore do not become partners with them.” That is to say, be careful. When Jesus hangs around with sinners, he’s doing his best; when we hang around with sinners, we take our chances. There is reason to watch. Having been friends with AA all my life, I’ve gotten a sense of this. There are some places you don’t go when you’re vulnerable. There are some places you

stay away from when alcohol is stalking you. And there are some relationships that are going to be just plain difficult and too much for us. So the author is shining a bright line here, because in fact there are bright-line situations we need to watch.

“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Here’s the difference. Moralism says it’s up to you. Now your behavior is up to the Lord. He wants you to stay out of situations you can stay out of, but basically he has taken charge of you. You are children of light, so “try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.” Walk as children of light, and try to figure out how you can put yourself in the best situation.

I’m going to visit my brother-in-law now, my sister-in-law’s husband, a Finn who lives in Estonia. He is a very dangerous person for me to visit, because he drinks like a fish and of course wants me to do the same. I can get by with saying “No, thank you” about four times, and then pretty soon it gets easier to say, “Well, maybe just once.” So I have to prepare for situations like this. We want to see them and be with them, but this is bright-line stuff. Some things I’m not prepared for, and in some situations I need help. So walk as a child of light. I can see it coming, and I have to go into it with prayer, ask for my neighbors’ prayers, and ask the good Lord to preserve whatever little bit of sobriety I have left, so that I don’t get lost someplace in Estonia and come stumbling back next year. That’s a distinct possibility, given these habits of mine.

So you want to watch these things. This is exactly this kind of common-sense wisdom. We don’t want to overinvest and say, “Now I’m pious and you’re a sinner.” On the other hand, we don’t want to be foolish and say we can handle these situations, as if the forgiveness of sins meant we could do as we please. There is a difference.

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.” Well, you can figure out some ways to apply that verse; you don’t need any help from me. I’ve got too good an imagination, and I can pretty much guess what’s going on in secret. “But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, ‘Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead.’” Keep your eyes open; watch it. The new Adam needs a little help. To be sure, the old Adam is not going to make the new one; it is not the job of your will to create yourself anew. But by the same token, a little visibility, a little caution, a little wisdom about what you can handle and what you can’t, is all appropriate.

“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.” I should memorize this verse before I go to see my brother-in-law. “But be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

There you go: two different spirits, one that is in it for all it can get, the other that is in it for the neighbor. You can see the difference, and even though again we have to be careful with this stuff, the difference is worth honoring. So we’ve got some help given to us here in the practical matters of living in this world.

John 6: Eat My Flesh

Now we’ll spend the rest of the time on the gospel, because this is about as complicated as John 6 gets. Jesus has been under pressure all the way through, as we’ve seen going back a couple of Sundays. His offense was to feed the hungry right out there in the middle of the wilderness. He broke the confidence people have in the causal nexus, the general sense that there’s no free lunch, that you get what you pay for. He offended that by coming up with lunch for five thousand people in the middle of nowhere, and not only lunch, but leftovers from this whole spectacular eruption of grace.

When you start being that gracious in an ungracious world, two things happen. One is that you attract hangers-on, people who would very much like the free lunch to continue. The other is that you attract people who would like to institutionalize the free lunch and keep it working. Both of them are a little ticked off, because they’d like to be in control of this. They’d like to make sure they’re right there, monitoring who receives and who is denied, and the circumstances of admission and denial. The old Adam very much wants to be in charge, and so Jesus has stepped on his toes. Worse than that, he has put the old fellow to death, and now the old Adam is struggling for a resurrection of his own while Jesus is giving him the real one.

So we know the offense now. One of the great things in all three sections of this text is this: offended as the old Adam is, eager to argue as he is, challenging as he is, Jesus never backs down on his promise.

Forde always liked to call the old Adam’s challenges, in this text and in other situations, the old Adam’s death-throe questions. These are the questions that arise when the gospel comes

home. Offended by the gospel, the old Adam turns pious and starts saying, “Well, you don’t really mean that. You don’t really mean ‘eat my body.’ You can’t mean that. You don’t really mean you’ve got food for everyone.” And of course the questions are all constructed so that the preacher gets rocked back on the defensive.

Here’s a classic example. You declare the unqualified forgiveness of sins, and somebody stops you after the service and says, “Did you think there might be real sinners out there? Did you think somebody might hear you forgive sins and think they don’t have to repent?” Somebody from a parish up around Fergus Falls will show up worried sick that a real sinner might have been in the service, and that with an unqualified absolution you forgave somebody who didn’t repent enough.

These are the old Adam’s death throes. The natural reaction of the preacher is to back up and say, “Well, you know,” and start qualifying. But notice how Jesus deals with this. He doesn’t qualify a thing. He just gets tougher. “I am the bread of life. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.” That’s the opening salvo, and when it provokes further reaction from the old Adam, he gets tougher and tougher, until he comes to this point: you are going to have to eat my flesh and drink my blood.

Eat my flesh and drink my blood. Well, this not only offends the Calvinists, of course, who have a whole lot invested in the old body-soul dualism. It offends everybody. “Are you talking cannibalism? What’s going on here?” In this text Jesus is sticking his finger under your nose and saying, “Eat it.” A lot of fun.

There have been times in the church when this text has served as the basis for some incredible proclamations. Sometimes it has been applied to the sacrament, which I think is a mistake. Luther was convinced that this is no reference to the sacrament at all, and that it is dangerous to hang too much sacramental theology on these passages. At any rate, in the ninth and eleventh centuries there were two great sacramental controversies, and one of them was settled by old Cardinal Humbert, who wrote the *Ego Berengarius*, a statement concerning the sacrament insisting that the faithful break the bones of Christ with their teeth and can feel his blood running down their throats. Luther talked about that, the pious *Ego Berengarius*. He just loved it, because finally it was graphic enough. My old teacher up in Canada, an Anglican of all Anglicans, used to say he thought this was excessive sacramental realism. Well, here’s a Lutheran rejoicing in the flesh, and a Calvinist Episcopalian backing off because it’s too much.

Well, it is too much, and part of the fun is that it is too much, and part of the grace is that it is too much. So we don't want to give up on that, but we want to see what is happening.

Jesus is sticking his promise literally down our throats, and he is offending us mightily, so that Marcus Borg and everybody else is going to ask, "Well, he doesn't really mean that, does he? He doesn't really mean we should eat his body. Come on, what are you talking about? Drink his blood? This is just plain excessive."

Well, you see what is happening. The gospel is exposing our view of the world, which we take as ultimate, and so our temptation is to make the gospel penultimate. We say, "This can't be." Why can't it be? Because in our view of reality you don't eat bodies. In our view of reality, the flesh, as Jesus will later say, doesn't count for very much. In our view of reality, what really matters is spiritual, and we don't like getting fingernails stuck between our teeth or having other bodily aspects brought to mind. We like it a little cleaner, thanks a lot. Our view of the world is set in stone, and Jesus' promise therefore becomes negotiable.

That is really the offense of the text: we flee to patch up our worldview. We run to protect ourselves from what doesn't quite fit, and we do it by adjusting the reality of Jesus' proclamation. It should be the other way around. Jesus' word is ultimate. Jesus has the last word. Jesus' word, "Your sins are forgiven," is the promise of the resurrection breaking loose in your hearing. Jesus' word: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." The words of resurrection are the last word. Of course they offend our sense of reality. In our sense of reality, our sins are set in stone and death is the last victor. Easter changed all that. Easter changed all that. Jesus has taken your sins upon his body and borne them on the tree.

And since he has borne them on the tree, your sins are no longer ultimate. Your sins have been washed away in a mighty flood of grace, way bigger than the feeding of the five thousand, way bigger than a hundred and twenty gallons of wine standing there waiting to be drunk, way, way bigger than any sea. This is what one of the great old American preachers, one of the Henkel brothers, used to call the heavenly flood of divine regeneration. It has broken loose, and it is carrying you along. It is full of water and full of bread, full of all the good things that will carry you right into eternal life. It is giving its blessing. That is ultimate; that is the last word. Your view of reality can be adjusted. Your view of reality is regularly adjusted. Good night, that's fairly low on the pecking order.

Christ Jesus is at the top of the pecking order. He has turned to you now and said, “Eat me. Eat my flesh and drink my blood.” And I’d say, just pull up your napkin and have at it, because there is nothing better in the whole world than this. Everything turns here, and everything turns here because Jesus, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, wants to be possessed. He wants us to take him in, and he wants to take us into himself. So he goes beyond the law, way beyond the law, way beyond distinctions between the good and the evil, way beyond being able to sit and watch and say, “Well, I’m pretty good, but that one is really bad.” Way beyond these relative distinctions we love to make, he goes to the bottom, and this is the bottom: “I am the bread of life. Whoever eats me will live forever.” There, that’s the last word.

So if he wants you to eat his flesh and drink his blood, forget the napkin, put down the knife and fork, and duck your head in it. Just go for it, because he is after you, and he wants you to possess him in this way, and to take you into himself. He is being graphic and too straightforward and more than a little offensive, because he is a little impatient with your hesitancy and with your ELCA-given worldview, where everything is polite and nobody ever has to say “I’m sorry.” He is going to take you way beyond that happy horse manure and anchor you in the reality of his promise. So eat him. Have at it. There you go.

As we finish with John 6, we come to the point where this promise stands virtually alone. He refuses to compromise it. Every time he is challenged, he raises the ante. He refuses to back down. Every time he is challenged, he states it even more plainly. He refuses to betray it, because of course he is the risen Christ, the one who makes promises and never breaks them. Unlike all of us, who have to qualify our promises with the reality of death, he no longer has any qualification to make. Crucified, he is risen, and risen, he can be body and blood to you, body and blood in such a way that he enters you and permeates you, sustains you and cherishes you and blesses you, and carries you into the future. So when death comes, you can wink at it and say, “Well, you might have me for a while, but I know who holds me forever.”

There you go. That’s the promise of the text. So your job this Sunday is to stand up and say: feed on him. The feed bag is down. Crawl in, cover yourself with it, eat and drink, and live forever. That is the promise that is made. So we’ll leave you with that.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBWuEnvSDjg>

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