

A HARD SAYING
John 6:60-71

Technical Notes of Matthew Henry

Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?" When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him. And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father." From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?" But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve.

We have here an account of the effects of Christ's discourse. Some were offended and others edified by it; some driven *from him* and others brought nearer *to him*.

To some it was a savor of death unto death; not only to the Jews, who were professed enemies to him and his doctrine, but even to many of *his disciples*, such as were disciples *at large*, who were his frequent hearers and followed him *in public*; a mixed multitude, like those among Israel, that began all the discontents. Now were we have,

1. Their murmurings at the doctrine they heard (v. 60); not a few, but many of them were offended at it. Of the several sorts of ground that received the seed, only one in four brought forth fruit. See what they say to it: *This is a hard saying, who can hear it?*

They did not like it themselves: "What stuff is this? *Eat the flesh, and drink the blood of the Son of man!* If it is to be understood figuratively, it is not intelligible; if literally, not practicable. What! must we turn cannibals? Can we not be religious but that we must be barbarous too?" Now, when they found it a hard saying, if they had humbly begged of Christ to have *declared unto them this parable*, he would have opened it, and their understandings too; for *the meek will he teach his way*. But they were not willing to have Christ's saying explained to them, because they would not lose the pretense for rejecting them--that they were *hard sayings*.

They think it impossible that anyone else should like it: "Who can hear it? Surely none can." Thus the scoffers at religion are ready to believe that all the intelligent part of mankind concur with them. They conclude with great assurance that no *man of sense* will admit the doctrine of Christ, nor any *man of spirit* submit to his laws. Because they cannot bear to be so *tutored*, so *tied up* themselves, they think none else can. *Who can hear it?* Thanks be to God, thousands have *heard* these sayings of Christ and have found them not only easy, but pleasant, as their *necessary food*.

2. Christ's animadversions [unfavorable comments] upon their murmurings.

He well enough knew their murmurings (v. 61). Their cavils [trivial objections] were secret in their own breasts, or whispered among themselves in a corner, but Christ *knew* them. He saw them, he heard them. **Note:** Christ takes notice not only of the bold and open *defiances* that are done to his name and glory by *daring sinners*, but of the secret slights that are put upon his doctrine by carnal professors. He knows that which the *fool says in his heart* and cannot for shame *speak out*. He observes how his doctrine is *resented* by those to whom it is *preached*; who *rejoice* in it, and who *murmur* at it; who are reconciled to it and bow before it, and who quarrel with it and rebel against it, though ever so secretly.

He knew it *in himself*--not by any information given him nor any external indication of the thing, but by his own divine omniscience. He knew it not as the prophets, by a *divine revelation* made to him (that which the prophets desired to know was sometimes hid from them, as 2 Kings 4:27), but by a *divine knowledge* in him. He is that essential Word that *discerns the thoughts of the heart* (Heb. 4:12,13). Thoughts are words to Christ; we should therefore take heed not only what we say and do, but what we think.

He well enough knew how to answer them: *Does this offend you? Is this a stumbling-block to you?*" See how people by their own willful mistakes create offenses to themselves. They take offense where there is none given, and even make it where there is nothing to make it of. **Note:** We may justly wonder that so much offense should be taken at the doctrine of Christ for so little cause. Christ speaks of it here with wonder: *"Does this offend you? How unreasonable are your quarrels!"* Now, in answer to those who condemned his doctrine as intricate and obscure,

He gives them a hint of his ascension into heaven, as that which would give an irresistible evidence of the truth of his doctrine. *What and if you shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? And what then? First, "If I should tell you of that, surely it would much more offend you, and you would think my pretensions too high indeed. If this be so hard a saying that you cannot hear it, how will you digest it when I tell you of my returning to heaven, whence I came down?"* Those who stumble at smaller difficulties should consider how they will get over greater. *Secondly, "When you see the Son of man ascend, this will much more offend you, for then my body will be less capable of being eaten by you in that gross sense wherein you now understand it"* (Dr. Whitby). Or, *thirdly, "When you see that, or hear it from those who shall see it, surely then you will be satisfied. You think I take too much upon me when I say, I came down from heaven, for it was with this that you quarreled (v. 42); but will you think so when you see me return to heaven?"* If he *ascended*, certainly he *descended* (Eph. 4:9,10). Christ did often refer himself thus to *subsequent* proofs ((1:50,51; 2:14; Matt. 12:40; 26:64). Let us wait awhile till the mystery of God shall be finished, and then we shall see that there was no reason to be offended at any of Christ's sayings.

He gives them a general key to this and all such parabolic discourses, teaching them that they are to be understood spiritually and not after a corporal and carnal manner. *It is the spirit that quickens, the flesh profits nothing.* As it is in the natural body, the animal spirits quicken and enliven it; and without these the most nourishing food would profit nothing (what would the body be the better for bread if it were not quickened and animated by the spirit), so it is with the soul. *First*, the bare participation of ordinances, unless the Spirit of God work with them and quicken the soul by them, *profits nothing.* The word and ordinances, if the Spirit works with them, are as food to a living man; if not, they are as food to a dead man. Even the flesh of Christ, the sacrifice for sin, will avail us nothing unless the blessed Spirit quicken our souls thereby and enforce the powerful influences of his death upon us, till we by his grace are planted together in

the likeness of it.

Secondly, the doctrine of eating Christ's flesh and drinking his blood, if it be understood literally, *profits nothing*, but rather leads us into mistakes and prejudices. But the spiritual sense or meaning of it quickens the soul, makes it *alive and lively*; for so it follows, *The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life*. To eat the flesh of Christ is a hard saying; but to believe that Christ died for me, to derive from that doctrine strength and comfort in my approaches to God, my oppositions to sin and preparations for a future state, this is the *spirit and life* of that saying, and construing it thus it is an excellent saying. The reason why men *dislike* Christ's sayings is because they *mistake* them. The literal sense of a parable does us no good; we are never the wiser for it. But the spiritual meaning is instructive.

Thirdly, the flesh profits nothing--those who are in the flesh (so some understand it), who are under the power of a carnal mind, profit not by Christ's discourses. But the Spirit quickens--those who have the Spirit, who are spiritual, are quickened and enlivened by them, for they are received *ad modum recipientis* (so as to correspond with the state of the receiver's mind). They found fault with Christ's sayings, whereas the fault was in themselves. It is only to sensual minds that spiritual things are *senseless* and *sapless*, spiritual minds *relish* them (1 Cor. 2:14,15).

He gives them an intimation of his *knowledge of them*, and that he had expected no better from them though they called themselves his disciples (v. 64,65). Now was fulfilled that of the prophet, speaking of Christ and his doctrine (Isa. 53:1), *Who has believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?* Both these Christ here takes notice of.

First, they did not believe his report: "There are some of you who said you would leave all to follow me who yet believe not." And this was the reason why the word preached did not profit them, because it was *not mixed with faith* (Heb. 4:2). They did not believe him to be the Messiah, else they would have acquiesced in the doctrine he preached and not have quarreled with it, though there were some things in it *dark, and hard to be understood*. **Note:** (1) Among those who are *nominal Christians*, there are many who are *real infidels*. (2) The unbelief of hypocrites, before it discovers itself to the world, is naked and open before the eyes of Christ. He *knew from the beginning* who they were of the multitudes that followed him that *believed*, and who of the twelve should betray him. He *knew from the beginning* of their acquaintance with him, and attendance on him (when they were in the hottest pang of their zeal) who were sincere (as Nathanael, 1:47) and who were not. Before they distinguished themselves by an overt act, he could infallibly distinguish *who believed* and who did not, whose love was *counterfeit* and whose *cordial*.

We may thus gather (1) that the apostasy of those who have long made a plausible profession of religion is a certain proof of their constant hypocrisy, and that *from the beginning they believed not*, but is not a proof of the possibility of the total and final apostasy of any true believers. Such revolts are not to be called the fall of real saints but the discovery of pretended ones (1 John 2:19). (2) That it is Christ's prerogative to *know the heart*. He knows who they are who *believe not* but dissemble [put on an appearance] in their profession; and yet he allows them room in his church, the use of his ordinances, and the credit of his name. He does not discover [reveal] them in this world unless they by their own wickedness discover [reveal] themselves. Such is the constitution of his visible church, and the discovering [revealing] day is yet to come. But if we pretend to judge men's hearts, we step into Christ's throne and anticipate his judgment. We are often deceived in men, and see cause to change our sentiments of them. But this we are sure of, that Christ knows all men and *his judgment is according to truth*.

Secondly, the reason why they did not believe his report was because the *arm of the Lord* was not revealed to them (v. 65): *Therefore said I to you that no man can come to me except it be given unto him of my Father* (referring to v. 44). Christ therefore could not but know who believed and who did not, because faith is the gift and work of God; and all his Father's gifts and works could not but be known to him, for they all passed through his hands. There he had said that none could *come to him, except the Father draw him*; here he says, *except it be given him of my Father*, which shows that God *draws* souls by giving them grace and strength and a heart to come, without which, such is the moral impotency of man in his fallen state, that he *cannot come*.

3. We have here their final apostasy from Christ hereupon: *From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him* (v. 66). When we admit into our minds hard thoughts of the word and works of Christ, and conceive a secret dislike, and are willing to hear insinuations tending to their reproach, we are then *entering into temptation*. It is as the letting forth of water. It is *looking back*, which, if infinite mercy prevent not, will end in *drawing back*. Therefore, take heed of the beginnings of apostasy.

See here the *backsliding* of these *disciples*. *Many of them went back* to their houses, and families, and callings, which they had left for a time to follow him. *Went back*, one to his farm and another to his merchandise. *Went back*, as Orpah did, to their people, and to their gods (Ruth 1:15). They had entered themselves in Christ's school, but they *went back*, did not only play truant for once, but took leave of him and his doctrine forever. **Note:** The apostasy of Christ's disciples from him, though really a strange thing, yet has been such a common thing that we need not be surprised at it. Here were *many* that *went back*. It is often so. When some backslide, many backslide with them; the disease is infectious.

The occasion of this backsliding: *From that time*, from the time that Christ preached this comfortable doctrine--that he is the *bread of life*, and that those who by faith feed *upon him* shall live *by him* (which, one would think, should have engaged them to cleave more closely to him)--from *that* time they withdrew. **Note:** The corrupt and wicked heart of man often makes that an occasion of offense which is indeed matter of the greatest comfort. Christ foresaw that they would thus take offense at what he said, and yet he said it. That which is the undoubted word and truth of Christ must be faithfully delivered, whoever may be offended at it. Men's humors must be captivated to God's word, and not God's word accommodated to men's humors.

The degree of their apostasy: *They walked no more with him*, returned no more to him and attended no more upon his ministry. It is hard for those who have been *once enlightened*, and have *tasted the good word of God, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance* (Heb. 6:4-6).

This discourse was to others a savor of life unto life. *Many went back*, but, thanks be to God, all did not. Even then the *twelve* stuck to him. Though the *faith of some be overthrown*, yet the *foundation of God stands sure*. Observe here the affectionate question which Christ put to the twelve: *Will you also go away?* He says nothing to those who sent back. *If the unbelieving depart, let them depart*. It was no great *loss* of those whom he never *had*; lightly come, lightly go. But he takes this occasion to speak to the twelve, to confirm them, and by trying their steadfastness the more to fix them. *Will you also go away?* "It is *at your choice* whether you will or no. If you will forsake me, now is the time, when so many do. It is an hour of temptation. If you will go back, go now." **Note:** Christ will detain none with him against their wills. His

soldiers are volunteers, not pressed men. The twelve had now had time enough to try how they liked Christ and his doctrine. None of them might afterwards say that they were trepanned [entrapped] into discipleship, and that if it were to happen again they would not do it. He here allows them a power of revocation, and leaves them at their liberty (Josh. 24:15; Ruth 1:15).

"It is *at your peril* if you do go away." If there was any secret inclination in the heart of any of them to depart from him, he stops it with this awakening question: "*Will you also go away?*" Think not that you hang at as loose an end as they did, and may go away as easily as they could. They have not been so intimate with me as you have been, nor received so many favors from me. They are gone, but will *you* also go? Remember your character and say, "Whatever others do, we will never go away. *Should such a man as I flee?*" (Neh. 6:11). **Note:** The nearer we have been to Christ and the longer we have been with him, and the more mercies we have received from him and the more engagements we have laid ourselves under to him, the greater will be our sin if we desert him.

"I have reason *to think you will not*. Will you go away? No, I have faster hold of you than so; *I hope better things of you* (Heb. 6:9), for *you are they who have continued with me*," (Luke 22:28). When the apostasy of some is a grief to the Lord Jesus, the constancy of others is so much the more his honor; and he is pleased with it accordingly. Christ and believers know one another too well to part upon every displeasure.

Observe here the believing reply which Peter, in the name of the rest, made to this question (v. 69). Christ put the question to them, as Joshua put Israel to their choice whom they would serve, with the design to draw out from them a promise to adhere to him, and it had the like effect. *Nay, but we will serve the Lord*. Peter was upon all occasions the *mouth of the rest*, not so much because he had more of his Master's ear than they, but because he had more tongue of his own; and what he said was sometimes approved and sometimes reprimanded (Matt. 16:17,23)--the common lot of those who are swift to speak. This here was well said--admirably well. He probably said it by the direction and with the express assent of his fellow-disciples. At least he knew their mind and spoke the sense of them all, and did not except [exclude] Judas, for we must hope the best.

Here is a good resolution to adhere to Christ, and so expressed as to intimate that they would not entertain the least thought of leaving him: "*Lord, to whom shall we go?* It were folly to go from you, unless we knew where to better ourselves. No, Lord, we like our choice too well to change." **Note:** Those who leave Christ would do well to consider to whom they will go, and whether they can expect to find rest and peace anywhere but in him (Ps. 73:27,28; Hos. 2:9). "*Whither shall we go?* Shall we make our court to the world? It will certainly *deceive* us. Shall we return to sin? It will certainly *destroy* us. Shall we leave the *fountain of living waters* for *broken cisterns?*"

The disciples resolve to continue their pursuit of life and happiness, and will have a guide to it, and will adhere to Christ as their guide, for they can never have a better. "Shall we go to the heathen philosophers and become their disciples? They are become vain in their imaginations, and, professing themselves to be wise in other things, are become fools in religion. Shall we go to the scribes and Pharisees and sit at their feet? What good can they do us who have made void the commandments of God by their traditions? Shall we go to Moses? He will send us back again to you. Therefore, if ever we find the way to happiness, it must be in following you." **Note:** Christ's holy religion appears to great advantage when it is compared with other institutions, for then it will be seen how far it excels them all. Let those who find fault with this

religion find a better before they quit it. A divine teacher we must have; can we find a better than Christ? A divine revelation we cannot be without; if the scripture be not such a one, where else may we look for it?

Here is a good reason for this resolution. It was not the inconsiderate resolve of a blind affection, but the result of mature deliberation. The disciples were resolved never to go away from Christ because of the *advantage* they promised themselves by him. "*You have the words of eternal life.*" They themselves did not fully understand Christ's discourse, for as yet the doctrine of the cross was a riddle to them. But in the general they were satisfied that *he had the words of eternal life*, that is, *first*, that the word of his doctrine showed the way to *eternal life*, set it before us and directed us what to do that we might inherit it. *Secondly*, that the word of his *determination* must confer eternal life. His *having the words of eternal life* is the same with his having *power to give eternal life to as many as were given him* (ch. 17:2). He had in the foregoing discourse assured *eternal life* to his followers. These disciples fastened upon this plain saying and therefore resolved to stick to him when the others overlooked this and fastened upon the *hard sayings*, and therefore forsook him. Though we cannot account for every mystery, every obscurity in Christ's doctrine, yet we know, in the general, that it is the word of eternal life and therefore must live and die by it. For if we forsake Christ, *we forsake our own mercies*.

They were resolved never to leave Christ because of the assurance they had concerning him (v. 69): *We believe, and are sure that you are that Christ*. If he be the promised Messiah, he must *bring in an everlasting righteousness* (Dan. 9:24), and therefore has the *words of eternal life*, for *righteousness reigns to eternal life* (Rom. 5:21). Observe, *first*, the *doctrine* they believed: that this Jesus was the Messiah promised to the fathers and expected by them, and that he was not a mere man but the Son of the living God, the same to whom God had said, *Thou art my son* (Ps. 2:7). In times of temptation to apostasy it is good to have recourse to our first principles and stick to them. And, if we faithfully abide by that which is *past dispute*, we shall be the better able both to *find* and to *keep* the truth in matters of doubtful disputation. *Secondly*, observe the *degree* of their faith. It rose up to a full assurance: *We are sure*. We have known it *by experience*; this is the best knowledge. We should take occasion from others' wavering to be so much the more established, especially in that which is the present truth. When we have so strong a faith in the gospel of Christ as boldly to venture our souls *upon it*, knowing *whom we have believed*, then, and not till then, we shall be willing to venture everything else for it.

Observe the melancholy remark which our Lord Jesus made upon this reply of Peter's: *Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?* And the evangelist tells us whom he meant: *he spoke of Judas Iscariot*. Peter had undertaken for them all that they would be faithful to their Master. Now Christ does not condemn his charity (it is always good to hope the best), but he tacitly corrects his confidence. We must not be too sure concerning any. God knows those that are his; we do not.

Observe here that hypocrites and betrayers of Christ are no better than devils. Judas not only *had* a devil, but he *was* a devil. One of you is a *false accuser*, so *διαβολος* sometimes signifies (2 Tim. 3:3). And it is probable that Judas, when he sold his Master to the chief priests, represented him to them as a bad man, to justify himself in what he did. But I rather take it as we read it: *He is a devil*, a devil incarnate, a fallen apostle, as the devil a fallen angel. He is Satan, an adversary, an enemy to Christ. He is Abaddon, and Apollyon, a son of perdition. He was of his father the devil, did his lusts, was in his interests, as Cain (1 John 3:12). Those whose bodies were possessed by the devil are never called devils (*demoniacs*, but not *devils*). But

Judas, into whose *heart* Satan entered and filled it, is called a *devil*.

Many that are *seeming* saints are *real* devils. Judas had as fair an outside as many of the apostles; his venom was, like that of the serpent, covered with a fine skin. He *cast out devils* and appeared an enemy to the devil's kingdom, and yet was himself a devil all the while. Not only he *will be* one shortly, but he *is one* now. It is *strange*, and to be wondered at; Christ speaks of it with wonder: *Have not I?* It is *sad* and to be lamented that ever Christianity should be made a cloak to diabolism.

The disguises of hypocrites, however they may deceive men and put a cheat upon them, cannot deceive Christ, for his piercing eye sees through them. He can call those *devils* that call themselves *Christians*, like the prophet's greeting to Jeroboam's wife, when she came to him in masquerade (1 Kings 14:6). *Come in, thou wife of Jeroboam.* Christ's *divine sight*, far better than any *double sight*, can see spirits.

There are those who are chosen by Christ to special services who yet prove false to him: *I have chosen you to the apostleship*, for it is expressly said that Judas was not chosen to eternal life (ch. 13:18), and yet one of *you* is a devil. **Note:** Advancement to places of honor and trust in the church is no certain evidence of saving grace. *We have prophesied in thy name.*

In the most *select* societies on this side of heaven, it is no new thing to meet with those who are corrupt. Of the twelve that were chosen to an intimate conversation with an *incarnate Deity*, as great an honor and privilege as ever men were chosen to, one was an *incarnate devil*. The historian lays an emphasis upon this, that Judas was *one of the twelve* who were so dignified and distinguished. Let us not reject and unchurch the twelve because *one of them is a devil*, nor say that they are all cheats and hypocrites because one of them was so. Let those that are so bear the blame and not those who, while they are undiscovered, incorporate with them. There is a society within the veil into which no unclean thing shall enter, a church of firstborn, in which are *no false brethren*.