

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
6:60-65

60. Therefore many of his disciples, when they heard *this*, said, This is a hard saying; who can hear it? 61. When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said to them, Does this offend you? 62. *What* then if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? 63. It is the Spirit who quickens; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life. 64. 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 should betray him. 65. And he said, Therefore I said to you that no man can come to me unless it has been granted to him by my Father.

60.--[*Therefore many of His disciples.*] It is plain that these were not true believers. Many who followed our Lord about and were called His "disciples" had no real grace in their hearts and followed Him from carnal motives. We must expect to see the same thing in every age. Not all who come to church, nor all who profess to admire and follow popular preachers, are real Christians. This is far too much forgotten.

[*This is a hard saying.*] This does not mean "hard" in the sense of being "difficult to understand." It is not so much "hard to the comprehension" as "hard to the feelings." Parkhurst defines it as "shocking to the mind." It is the same word that is used in the parable of the talents, "You are a hard man" (Matt. xxv.24), and in the Epistle of Jude, "the hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (Jude 15).

Some think that the "hard saying" means the whole discourse. My own opinion is that it refers specially to our Lord's concluding words about eating His flesh and drinking His blood.

[*Who can hear it?*] The "hearing" here is evidently the hearing so as to believe, receive, and obey. "Who can believe, receive, and obey such a saying as this?" (See John v.24, viii.43, x.3,16,27, xviii.37, 1 John iv.6.)

61.--[*Jesus knew in Himself.*] This means that He knew by that divine knowledge through which He always "knew what was in man." (John ii.25.)

[*His disciples murmured at it.*] This would be more literally rendered "His disciples are murmuring about this." He spoke at the very moment of their murmuring.

[*Does this offend you?*] This means, "Is this saying of mine a stumbling block to you? Is the doctrine of eating my flesh and drinking my blood too humbling a doctrine for your hearts to receive?"

62.--[*What then...Son of Man ascend.*] This means, "What will ye think and say of my ascension into heaven?" What will your feelings be if you behold this body of mine going up to that heaven from whence I came down? Will

you not be much more offended?" (See John ii.12.)

The first thing, we must remember, that the Jews "murmured" about was our Lord's saying that He "came down from heaven." The second thing was His saying that He would "give them His flesh to eat." Both times our Lord's human body was the subject. Here our Lord asks them what they would think if they saw that same body "ascending up" into heaven. Even then, after His ascension, they would have to "eat His flesh and drink His blood" if they desired eternal life. What would they think of that? Would they not find it even more difficult to receive and believe?

[*Where he was before.*] This is an expression which no Socinian can explain. It is a clear assertion of the "preexistence" of Christ.

Some think, as Olshausen and Tholuck, that our Lord only means generally, "If you are offended and unbelieving even now while I am with you, how much more will ye be when I go away!" But this is a frigid and unsatisfactory interpretation.

It is fair to say that Stier thinks, with Chrysostom, Cyril, Theophylact, and others, that our Lord did not mean that His ascension would be a greater difficulty to His disciples, but that, on the contrary, it would remove their doubts and weaken the offense which they now felt. Hutcheson and Alford seem to agree with this. But I cannot see it. Stier thinks our Lord implied, "Then, after my ascension, it will be disclosed to you how and in what way my human corporeity, become heavenly and glorified, may be given to be eaten and to be drunk." (Compare John viii.28.)

63.--[*It is the Spirit, etc.*] This text is, perhaps, one of the most difficult in the Gospel of St. John. It is easy to slur it over and be satisfied with a vague impression that it means "We are to put a spiritual sense on our Lord's words." That, no doubt, is a true idea. But when we come to a close examination of the words which compose the verse, I think no one can be satisfied with such a loose interpretation of Scripture. That our Lord's words "are to be taken spiritually" may be very true. But to say so is not to explain the verse.

What is meant by the expression, "It is the Spirit that quickens"?

(a) Some think that "the Spirit" here means "the divine nature of Christ" (as Rom. i.4, 1 Peter ii.18), in contradistinction to His human nature, here called His "flesh." (See 1 Cor. xv.45.) They consider our Lord to mean, "It is my divine nature, as God, which is the means of communicating spiritual benefit to men. My human nature, as flesh, could of itself do no good to souls. It is not, therefore, any carnal eating of my flesh that could be of use to you, and I did not mean any such eating."

This is the opinion of Cyril, Cartwright, Poole, Bishop Hall, Trapp, Toletus, Rollock, Hutcheson, Leigh, Burkitt, Quesnel, Burgon, and Wordsworth.

(b) Some think that "the Spirit" here means "the Holy Spirit," the Third Person of the Trinity. They consider our Lord to mean, "It is the Holy

Spirit who alone can convey spiritual life to the soul of man. The mere eating of flesh, whether my flesh or any other flesh, cannot do good to the inner man. When, therefore, I spoke of 'eating my flesh,' I did not mean the bodily act of eating any literal flesh, but a very different kind of eating and a very different sort of flesh." This is the opinion of Zwingle, Melancthon, Calvin, Bucer, Ecolampadius, Pellican, Flacius, Bullinger, Cocceius, Diodati, Piscator, Musculus, Baxter, Lampe, Henry, Scott, Stier, Besser, Alford.

(c) Some think that "the Spirit" here means "the spiritual doctrine or sense" as opposed to "the letter" or literal sense of scriptural language. (2 Cor. iii.6.) They consider the sentence to mean, "It is the spiritual sense of my words and not the literal which is quickening, or life-giving, to the soul. When I spoke of 'my flesh,' I did not mean my flesh literally but my flesh in a spiritual sense. My flesh literally could be of no use to anyone." This seems to be the opinion of Chrysostom, Theophylact, Euthymius, Brentius, Beza, Ferus, Cornelius á Lapide, Schottgen, Pearce, Parkhurst, A. Clarke, Faber, Barnes, Webster. But it is not easy to make out clearly, in every instance, what is the precise meaning put on the words "the Spirit" by the interpreters who take this third view. There are not a few shades of variety in their opinions.

I must acknowledge that I find it difficult to give a decided opinion on the comparative merits of these three views of the expression before us. There is something to be said for each of the three. On the whole, I think the second and third are more satisfactory than the first; and I incline to prefer the second to the third. But I say this with much hesitation.

Rollock, who holds strongly that "the Spirit" means Christ's divine nature, maintains that "the flesh" means the whole human nature of Christ. He thinks that the meaning of "the flesh profits nothing" is that all the works of our Lord's body, whether in life or death--His fulfilling the law, His sufferings on the cross--derive their whole efficacy from the union of the two natures. "It is the divine nature that is life-giving. The human nature, alone and separate from the divine, is useless and unprofitable." He holds, therefore, that to eat the human nature of Christ alone (*i.e.* His flesh) could do us no good; as, unless we could eat His divine nature also, it would be unprofitable. He concludes, therefore, that the only eating of Christ that can be useful to the soul must of necessity be the spiritual eating of faith and not any carnal eating of the Lord's supper. Hutcheson agrees with this view.

The expression, "The words that I speak to you, they are spirit, and they are life," is just as difficult as the former part of the text. The word "spirit" here, at any rate, cannot mean the divine nature of Christ. If it were so taken, the sentence would be meaningless. The word Spirit must either mean the "Holy Spirit," or "the spiritual sense" as opposed to the letter. The sentence then might be paraphrased in either of the following ways: (1) "The words that I speak to you, received into your hearts and believed, are the Spirit's influence, the ministration of the Spirit, and the Spirit's means of giving you life." This is Rollock's view. Or: (2) "The words that I speak to you are to be taken in a spiritual sense, or are spiritual words, and taken in that sense they are life-giving to the soul."

This is Augustine's view.

I must honestly confess that neither of these explanations is quite satisfactory, but they are the nearest approach I can see to a satisfactory interpretation. The sentence is evidently a concise elliptical one, and it seems impossible to convey it in English without a paraphrase.

Alford paraphrases the sentence thus: "The words that I have spoken, viz., the words 'my flesh and blood,' are spirit and life: spirit, not flesh only, living food, not carnal and perishable." I venture to think that this explanation is not more precise or satisfactory than either of those I have suggested.

The expression, "The words that I speak to you," must probably be confined to the words our Lord had spoken about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, and not referred to the whole discourse.

After all, however difficult and elliptical the sentence before us may be, there is a truth which throws light on it with which every true Christian must be familiar. It is the words of Christ brought home to the hearts of men by the Spirit, which are the great agents employed in quickening and giving spiritual life to men. The Spirit impresses Christ's words on a man's conscience. These words become the parent of thoughts and convictions in the man's mind. From these thoughts spring all the man's spiritual life. The soul is not benefited by bodily actions, such as eating or drinking, but by spiritual impressions which the Holy Spirit alone can produce. In producing these spiritual impressions, the Spirit specially employs the agency of Christ's "words" and hence comes the great principle that "His words are spirit and life."

64.--*[There are some of you who do not believe.]* The connection of this sentence with the preceding verses seems to be this: "The true account of your murmuring and thinking my sayings 'hard' is your lack of faith. You do not really believe Me to be the Messiah, though you have followed Me and professed yourselves my disciples. And not really believing in Me, you are offended at the idea of eating my flesh and drinking my blood."

[Jesus knew...who did not believe.] This is one of the many places which declares our Lord's Divine knowledge of all hearts and characters. He was never deceived by crowds and apparent popularity, as His ministers often are. When it says "from the beginning," it probably means "from the beginning of His ministry, and from the time when the unbelieving 'many' before Him first professed to be His disciples." Of course our Lord, as God, knew all things "from the beginning" of the world. But it does not seem necessary to suppose that this is meant here.

Rollock remarks our Lord's example of patient teaching and preaching to all without exception, though He knew that many did not and would not believe. He points out what a pattern it is to ministers. Christ knew exactly who would believe. Ministers do not know.

[Who should betray Him.] We should not fail to notice in this expression our Lord's marvelous patience in allowing one whom He knew to be about to

betray Him to be one of His Apostles. It was doubtless meant to teach us that false profession must be expected everywhere and must not surprise us. How much we ought to tolerate and put up with if our Lord tolerated Judas near Him! The pain and sorrow which the fore-knowledge of the conduct of Judas must have caused to our Lord's heart is a circumstance in our Lord's sufferings which ought not to be forgotten.

65.--[*And He said...no man can come...granted to him by the Father.*] The connection of this verse seems to be as follows: "There are some of you who do not believe, and that is the reason why I said to you that no man can come to Me unless the Father gives him grace to come and draws his heart to Me. The Father has not given you grace and drawn you to Me, and therefore you do not believe."