

You Are What You Eat!

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread he will live forever. The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

⁵² At that, the Jews argued among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"

⁵³ So Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. ⁵⁴ The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, ⁵⁵ because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. ⁵⁶ The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the manna your ancestors ate—and they died. The one who eats this bread will live forever."

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As you know, the Romans persecuted the Christians in the first three centuries of their existence. Like any government, the Romans would publicly tell its citizens why Christians should be persecuted in order to justify their actions. Here are some of the charges. They accused Christians of practicing magic. They accused the Christians of atheism. Rome had a state religion, emperor worship. Christians wouldn't worship the emperor or put the special decorations on worship the emperor day. They were accused of obstinacy or being stubborn because they refused to stop believing in their God. They were accused of incest because they called each other brother and sister. They were accused of infanticide because they would praise the fact that a baby from Bethlehem was killed on a cross. And they were accused of cannibalism because they ate body and blood in their worship services.

Well, our gospel reading has something that should have made you jump up in your seat. It sounded like Jesus is promoting cannibalism when he said that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Is this true? What does Jesus mean by that? Well, let's take a deeper look at it.

I. Eating Jesus' flesh means to believe in him.

Imagine you are a foreign exchange student living in the United States. You are staying at the home of an American family. You can speak English to get along, but you are far from mastering the language. Then one day you hear the mother in your host family say to her small child, "I love you so much I can eat you up!" You would be confused. "I know what love means," the foreign exchange student would say to himself, "and I know what eat means. It means to put something in your mouth, chew it up, swallow it." What is this mother going to do? Is she going to show her affection for this small child by biting off one of her fingers and eat it? Strange.

That is how the crowd felt during Jesus sermon in our text. ***"Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. ... ⁵⁴ The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, ⁵⁵ because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."*** If you read of some wacky religion in California where they would literally cannibalize one of their own members, you would be disgusted, even demand that the authorities would stop them. The Romans used propaganda like that to justify their persecution of the Christians. This claim bothered this Jewish congregation: ***"At that, the Jews argued among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"*** Did Jesus really mean to say that they should start tearing off parts of his body and start eating? That is what they argued about. But what does Jesus mean here?

Some think he is referring to Holy Communion. No, he isn't. Understand, he hasn't even instituted Holy Communion yet. Also, one can get into heaven without ever taking Holy Communion. Now, please don't think that Communion isn't all that important. It is special. Jesus gives it to us. It assures us our sins are truly forgiven. But I can't find a passage where it says that you can't go into heaven unless you take Communion. In our gospel for today Jesus says we must eat his flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life. He doesn't say that about Communion, so this isn't a reference to it.

If this can't be a reference to Communion, then what does Jesus mean when he says we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. He gave us the answer to that in last week's text and sermon in vv. 47-48: ***"I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life."*** Now in today's text he says, ***"The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."*** Believe and you have eternal life. Eat his flesh and blood and you have eternal life. There is only one meaning. Eating his flesh and blood is nothing more than to simply believe in Jesus.

Why did Jesus speak this way? Obviously, it caused confusion, so why did he use this graphic picture to mean believe? You could argue that Jesus knew that this crowd was going to reject him anyway so confuse them more. That is why he often spoke in parables, to hide the meaning from those who already tuned Jesus out. But I don't think that is the case here. In fact, I see Jesus reaching out to this skeptical crowd. He was letting them know what he has to offer them, eternal life, and how easy it is to have it by believing.

Let the picture here of eating and drinking tell you what it means to believe. Let's say you smell roast beef cooking in the oven. That smell is awesome, but smelling it will do you no good. You can look at it and how it has that perfect crust on the outside. But that image will do you know good. You can even taste it and it tastes really good, but tasting will not help you. Only when you take a bite, chew it up a bit and swallow it will that roast beef do you good. When you eat it will it nourish your body and give you strength.

I remember a prayer in the old 1941 *The Lutheran Hymnal* where it says to inwardly digest God's Word. That is what Jesus means here. Jesus is telling these folks to do more than look at him. He is telling them to do more and listen to his words. He is saying telling them to digest his words, to even digest him so his promises can do us good. I can acknowledge that we should not worry and that God will provide for us. But that is only head knowledge. I have digested this promise when I trust him, when I go to bed knowing that tomorrow somehow, some way he will provide.

II. Believing him means fellowship with God.

What does such believing do for us? It gives us fellowship with God. ***"⁵⁶The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. ⁵⁷Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me."*** What does it mean to have fellowship with God? It means there was a time when there was no fellowship. Romans 5:10 describes this time: ***"When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."*** What do enemies do? They wage war on one another. Every day the sinful human comes up with a way to thwart God's plan. He opposes God. He digs in deep and resists God's appeals to him. Have you see that warfare around you, even in your heart?

Or go to the workplace. A contract is signed. Party A promises to do this and Party B promises to do that. What happens when Party A says no? The contract is broken. Party B then says you won't get this. That contract is the Law which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. So you want to live in a perfect, holy heaven and who wouldn't because it is perfect and holy? Well, this is what perfect people do in a perfect: love God with all your heart; love your neighbor as yourself; honor marriage and the gift of sex; don't cheat or be lazy; honor those in authority; and so on. We break that contract. We earn something, but it isn't heaven. ***"The wages of sin is death."*** And what should God, Party B, do? It says in Matthew, ***"And throw that the worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*** This is what it means to have no fellowship with God, and it lasts forever beyond the grave.

Yet, ***"When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."*** Reconcile means to establish peace and a friendship between two people, not a ceasefire where each suspiciously watches the other, but a friendship. God reconciled us to himself through Christ. Jesus gave up his flesh and blood as the price for what we did to God. And it is ours simply through faith. Don't just see Jesus. Don't marvel at him. Digest this promise. Let it feed and nourish you so you do believe because by believing you have eternal life.

"⁵⁸This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the manna your ancestors ate—and they died. The one who eats this bread will live forever." Jesus comes full circle here. This whole section, this whole chapter in John got started when folks wanted more bread from Jesus after seeing him feed the 5000 with only two loaves of bread and five fish. They wanted more of that. We have two miracles here, manna from heaven that fed the people for forty years in the desert and the feeding of the 5000. But

Jesus is trying to focus them on himself and what he can really do. "Look around you," Jesus is implying here. "Do you see any of those who ate manna in the desert? Of course not. They all died and it wasn't from a lack of food. I can give you all the bread you would ever want, but the same will happen to you. You will die. What I am offering you is special. If you eat of this bread, you will live forever." ***"Truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in yourselves. ⁵⁴The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day, ⁵⁵because my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."*** Not even physical death can interrupt that eternal life.

Don't regard this as some sort of fountain of youth that will make us live indefinitely. Picture it more as a rescue plan. By one man sin entered the world and death through sin. What the Lord promised to do is undo the devil's work and restore our relationship with him, and he does this through Jesus Christ. It is a relationship that will last forever.

So, what's for lunch today? What will you have for dinner tonight? We have to plan the menu every day, don't we. We are constantly shopping and preparing food. Often it is fun. Usually it is tasty. Sometimes it is tedious. And we do well to make sure we get the kind of food we need. Do the same with Jesus. Thankfully, he doesn't have to die on the cross three times a day to save us. His death is sufficient to cover the sins of the entire world. Your salvation is complete. Make sure Jesus is on your menu because, "You are what you eat." INJ Amen.