

# John's Gospel - the Dilemma of Discipleship

by John Vissers

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of radical obedience to Jesus, entering into His death and cross, and understanding the demands of discipleship.*

**Duration:** 39:11

**Scripture:** John 6:60-71

**Topics:** "Discipleship"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher reads from John chapter 6, specifically verses 60 to 71, which concludes a conversation Jesus had with his disciples and religious leaders. Jesus presents a hard teaching that many of his disciples find difficult to accept. He explains that the flesh counts for nothing and that the Spirit gives life. Jesus emphasizes the scandal of the cross and the reality of his mission. Despite performing miracles and feeding the 5,000, many disciples desert Jesus when he reveals his true identity. This passage highlights the sadness of verse 66, where it states that many disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

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## Transcript

Turn with me in your Bibles tonight. We're continuing in our study of John's Gospel, and I'd like to read this evening from John chapter 6, and we read verses 60 to 71, which is the last paragraph, really the last pericope, the last story in chapter 6 of John's Gospel, bringing to a conclusion, really, this episode, this conversation that Jesus has been having with some of his disciples, some followers, and some of the religious leaders. So let's hear the Word of God.

On hearing it, many of his disciples said, this is a hard teaching, who can accept it? Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before? The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe.

For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe, and who would betray him. He went on to say, this is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

You do not want to leave me too, do you? Jesus asked the twelve. Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of

God.

Then Jesus replied, have I not chosen you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil. He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who though one of the twelve was later to betray him. Amen.

May God bless to us this reading from his word tonight. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you this evening for your word.

We thank you for your call to our lives. We pray this evening that you would speak to us through your word by your spirit concerning that call. And wherever we are on the pathway of discipleship tonight, we pray that you would take these words and apply them to our own hearts and our own lives.

And so may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our Redeemer through Jesus Christ. Amen. In his book, which is a wonderful book called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Eugene Peterson begins that book with these words.

He says, this world is no friend to grace. This world is no friend to grace. And then he goes on to say this, a person who makes a commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord does not find a crowd immediately forming to applaud the decision, nor old friends spontaneously gathering around to offer congratulations and counsel.

Ordinarily, there is nothing directly hostile, but an accumulation of puzzled disapproval and agnostic indifference constitutes nevertheless surprisingly formidable opposition. If you're a Christian, and if you've been a Christian for a while, perhaps you've been on the pathway of discipleship for many years, or perhaps you've just recently become a Christian, you will know that these words, in fact, are quite true. The world is no friend to grace.

Sometimes the opposition is openly hostile, like when an open line radio host attacks the church like happened not so long ago on one of our Toronto radio stations. But more often the opposition is far more subtle. It's usually far more subtle than simply an outright attack.

And millions of people, you see, are willing to associate themselves with Jesus, and many of them are willing to accept Jesus on their own terms. In fact, all the studies that have been done in of belief indicate that upwards of 80% of Canadians believe in God and even are willing to affirm that they believe that Jesus is the Son of God. But the question is, do people really understand the reality of grace? And do they really understand the radical call that Jesus makes to discipleship? Do we really understand the demands of discipleship? Do we really understand what it means to follow Jesus? We really shouldn't be surprised by this reality, because, in fact, that's precisely what's described in our passage tonight.

Many people had clustered around Jesus. Many people had been willing to associate themselves with him, but then they deserted him. They were quite willing to be identified with him when he fed the 5,000 with five loaves and two fish.

I mean, after all, a Savior who performs miracles, a Savior who provides a free lunch, a Savior who puts on a good show is easy to follow. But things are different when Jesus presents his claims, when Jesus begins to teach about who he is, when Jesus begins to uncover the reality of his identity, then things become a little more difficult. And I want to suggest to you tonight that verse 66 of this chapter, John chapter 6, is perhaps one of the saddest verses in all of the Bible, because it says this, Now, we need to

understand that things had been building up for some time to reach this point.

John makes it clear that people had been following Jesus for all of the wrong reasons. In John chapter 2, you'll remember that Jesus changed water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. And then a little later, he cleared the temple in Jerusalem of money changers.

And even though many people saw the miraculous signs, and even though they believed in Jesus, John says that Jesus would not entrust himself to them because he knew what was in the heart of men and women. And so already in the second chapter of John's gospel, you see you have the real issue put before you in a very clear way. The issue isn't do we believe in Jesus, but has Jesus entrusted himself to us? In John chapter 4, Jesus heals a royal official's son.

In chapter 5, he heals a lame man at the Sheepgate Pool in Jerusalem. In chapter 6, he feeds the 5,000 and he walks on water before his disciples. But despite all of this, when the religious leaders and others begin to press in upon Jesus and begin to dispute with him and argue with him, and when Jesus starts talking about who he really is, when he starts talking about his mission, when he starts talking about the cross, when his teaching no longer tickles the ears of those who followed him, some of them then chose to turn away, to turn back and followed him no more.

And it's quite clear that as Jesus watches them walk away, and you can almost see the picture, he turns to the 12 and he says, what about you? You don't want to leave me too, do you? And Peter, who's always the first to jump in with his two cents worth to go where angels fear to tread, to boldly go where no disciple has gone before, Peter makes a marvelous confession of faith. But even then, even despite this high note, this confession of faith which Peter makes, the passage does not end on a high note, because even though the 12 are willing to stay with Jesus, even though Peter's made this marvelous confession about who Jesus is, even though they're willing to stay with Jesus and not follow the other disciples who had left him, nevertheless, among the 12, among those who are still willing to follow him, is Judas, the one who would betray him. Now, this passage, it seems to me, if you think into it carefully, and if you really begin to start to understand the dynamics of what's being described here, this passage raises very important questions for us.

I mean, what does it really mean to follow Jesus? What really attracts people to Jesus? Why do some people become Christians and then turn away? Why is it that some people are willing to associate themselves with Jesus Christ for a time as long as it suits their purposes, but then they drift away and turn away from him? And I want to suggest to you tonight that there are a number of pictures of discipleship in this passage that we need to look at very briefly and try to understand what these pictures, these portraits of discipleship reveal to us. But as we look at these pictures of discipleship or these portraits of discipleship, we need to press through them to try to get at the heart of what the real issues are, what they reveal about the demands of discipleship and the dilemma of discipleship. Now, I want us to begin to reflect on the pictures of discipleship in this passage by taking up the the primary portrait that's the whole first part of this passage, and that is the defection of the grumbling disciples in verses 60 to 66.

You need to remember that Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, and some of the religious leaders and some other spectators found the teaching of Jesus very difficult to understand and also difficult to handle, and so they began to grumble. And there's really no surprise in that, but the story takes an interesting turn when they are joined by some of those who are following Jesus. That is, not only the religious leaders make this grumbling noise against Jesus, but now some of the disciples join in, and

when they heard the teaching of Jesus, these disciples said, this is a hard teaching.

Who can accept it? And so they find his teaching not only difficult to understand, it's not just a question of intellectual understanding or rational affirmation, but it's also a willingness to accept what Jesus has been saying. Just think about what he's been saying. He placed himself above Moses, the great prophet of Israel.

He said, I am the bread of life, and what he's really saying is that God provided manna to the children of Israel in the desert when they were out there wandering. I am the bread of life. I am greater than that manna.

I have been sent from the Father. They found his language offensive. He talked earlier about eating flesh and drinking blood, and this raises for all of them, of course, the question about who Jesus really is.

I mean, after all, this is Galilee. They all know him. They know that he's from Galilee, from Nazareth.

They know his father, Joseph, the carpenter. They know his mother, Mary. He grew up on the streets around them, and so when he starts talking this way, it doesn't seem to make any sense, and they say we can't accept it.

But notice that Jesus doesn't back away. He doesn't ease his demand for discipleship. He doesn't reduce his claim in light of their discomfort.

He says, does this offend you? Because if this offends you, I need to tell you something more. And notice what he says. If you can't accept the fact that I have come down from heaven, how are you possibly going to accept the fact that I am going to ascend again to where I was before? If you can't accept the fact that I have been sent from the Father, how will you believe that I am going to return to the Father? And we need to understand that Jesus at this point is talking about the cross.

Those who stumble because Jesus says he descended from heaven, those who stumble because Jesus calls himself the bread of life, they're never going to be able to accept the fact that he is going to ascend to heaven again, and the means of that ascension is going to be through the cross of Calvary. And we need to understand that in John's gospel, the cross of Jesus is depicted as the lifting up of Jesus. The Son of Man must be lifted up from the earth.

He says, if I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me. And so in a very real sense, the cross is the exaltation, the means of the exaltation and the triumph and the victory of Jesus. But those without faith, when they look at the cross, he's saying to them, if you're going to look at the cross and what's going to happen to me without faith, you're going to see it as a defeat.

You're going to see it as a final rejection. You're going to see it as an ultimate humiliation and you won't want any part of it. You won't want to be associated with it because you won't see the reality of God's hand at work.

But Jesus says it's the very heart of the gospel. It's the very center of my mission, the scandal of the cross. Now, Jesus says a similar thing in Matthew's gospel in chapter 16 and verses 21 to 28.

There, Jesus predicted his death and he explained to the disciples that he was going to go to Jerusalem, that he was going to be arrested, that he was going to suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, that he

was going to be killed, and that on the third day he was going to be raised again to life. And you remember that Peter, again Peter, takes him aside and he says, Lord, I'd like to have a little talk with you. You know, you've got this all wrong.

This is not going to happen to you. But Jesus said to Peter, out of my sight, Satan, you are a stumbling block to me, for you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. And you see, that's really the point here, that discipleship requires an understanding that Jesus had to go to the cross.

And even those of us, many of us who claim to be followers of Jesus, do not have in mind the things of God, but rather the things of men. We don't think like citizens of heaven. We think from below.

We try to fit Jesus into our own pattern. We want to be happy. We want to feel good.

And as long as Jesus does all of that, we're happy to be counted among his disciples. But Jesus is saying very clearly here, as he says in Matthew chapter 16, that if you want to be my disciple, you need to understand that I am going to a cross. And that as my disciple, you will be identified with me in that cross.

Which is why he says in Matthew 16, if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? I want you to hear what Jesus said earlier in John 6, because the same words now ring true.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. You see, what he's saying in Matthew 16 to his disciples, what he's saying here in John chapter 6 to his disciples, is that a true disciple of Jesus, a true disciple is someone who enters into the death of Jesus.

A disciple of Jesus is someone who knows what it is, as the Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3.10, to share in the fellowship of his sufferings. The fellowship of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus. If I am a disciple of Jesus, I know what it is to be crucified with Christ, so that I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

And as the children led us this morning, the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2.20, that identification with Christ, that union with Christ. And so a disciple of Jesus takes up the cross and follows him.

A disciple doesn't pick and choose about what they like about Jesus and what they dislike. It's not just a question of taking the easy sayings, the affirmations, the things that make us feel good, the warm fuzzies, but it's also a matter of building our lives on the very center of the gospel itself, that Jesus died on the cross for our sin, and that we enter into that reality by faith and in union with him. Over 50 years ago, actually over 60 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian leader during the Second World War, said this.

He said, we've turned the gospel into cheap grace. Cheap grace. Bonhoeffer was 39 years old when he was hanged in 1945 by the Nazis just weeks before the end of the war in April of that year, in April of 1945, and he had written in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, a number of years before these words, when Christ calls us, he bids us come and die.

And that's really what Jesus is saying here. If you want to be my disciple, you need to enter into my death. You need to realize that it's death to yourself.

You're turning away from self and trusting in me for life. Many of you know the story of Jim Elliott and the others who were killed in 1956 in South America as they tried to make contact with an unreached people's group there in South America. I was interested in reading in the most recent issue of Christian Week that they have just rediscovered within the last number of months the grave site of the five who had been killed in 1956.

It had been lost for all these years, but it was rediscovered near the beach where they had been killed. And these five martyrs, these five modern missionary martyrs, including Jim Elliott, gave themselves for the cause of the gospel of Jesus. And Elliott had written in his journal a few years before he died these words, he is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

John Calvin, I think, puts it nicely when he says, true knowledge of God is born out of obedience. You see, we like to think that knowing God has to do with our minds, that we can somehow figure this out. Or in our postmodern world, we like to think that knowing God has to do with the way we feel, you know, if we sort of feel right, then we know God.

That's not what the Bible says. Knowledge of God in the Bible doesn't first have to do with rational understanding and affirmations. It doesn't have to do in the first instance with how we feel.

It has to do with obedience. If you want to really know God, then you obey God. And the problem with these disciples, you see, is that they didn't get this.

They didn't really know Jesus because they weren't really willing to enter into the death that was to come, and they weren't really willing to obey him. And I want to suggest to you tonight that for the church today, for disciples today, that's our problem as well. Too many of us don't really know Jesus.

Too many of us aren't really willing to obey Jesus. And the sad truth is that had we been there on this occasion, many of us wouldn't have stayed with the twelve. Many of us would have turned around and walked away.

And I'm not calling you tonight to be a Bonhoeffer or to be a Jim Elliott, but I do want to ask you this question. What does radical obedience to the Word and to the will of Jesus mean for your life? You may not be called to become a modern martyr for the Christian faith, but there is a radical obedience that is required of you. It might have to do with the way you use your money.

It might have to do with the reality of sex in your lives. It might have to do with power. It might have to do with alcohol.

It might have to do with tobacco. It might have to do with drugs. It might have to do with work.

It might have to do with education. It might have to do with family. It might have to do with what you read.

It might have to do with how you invest your life in things that matter. It could have to do with any number of things. But Jesus calls us to radical obedience, to enter into the reality of His death, of His cross.

What does it mean for you tonight not to walk away, but to stay with Jesus? It goes on here in verses 67 to 69. We've got here Peter's confession of Jesus as the Holy One of God. Thank God for Peter.

When Jesus inquires of the twelve whether they plan to hit the road as well, Peter jumps right in and he says, Lord, you alone have the words of eternal life. In Matthew 16 you'll remember it was Peter who said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. It was Peter who makes this marvelous confession of Jesus.

And now so too here, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. Now notice what's in this confession.

Peter says there's no one else that we can go to. He knows that Jesus is their only hope. He knows that Jesus is the only way to the Father.

This is the same Peter who in Acts chapter 4, before the Sanhedrin, in Acts 4.12 declares this, salvation is found in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. You see, true discipleship doesn't begin when somehow we dig down a little deeper and just try a little harder and give ourselves more to the Lord. True discipleship begins when we realize we don't have any choice.

When in fact there is no one else to go to. There is no one else who can give us life. He alone is the way and the truth and the life, that there's no other pathway that leads to life.

And many people learn this the hard way. And the fact of the matter is that many people only become believers in Jesus Christ when they come to the end of themselves. When they've come to the end of their own resources, when they've come to the end of their own searchings after attempting to find fulfillment themselves, when they've come to the end, then they realize that there is nowhere else to go to find life but then to Jesus.

And that's what Peter's saying here about Jesus. That in the end, you alone Lord are the one who has life. There's nowhere else to go.

We know that. And then he says that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life. And this is a reference to what Jesus had just said to those who were deserting him in verse 63.

The words which Jesus speaks are spirit and they are life. His words are not just the words of any man, a good teacher, but they are the words of God. The words which breathe new life.

Jesus who is the Word made flesh as we saw in John chapter 1. The Word made flesh is the Word that breathes life into us. And Peter says, Jesus, you are the Holy One of God. This is an Old Testament title.

The Lord is the Holy One. And the contrast is very clear. On the one hand, you have disciples who desert Jesus because they will not accept his teaching.

And as a result, they really don't know him. And here, on the other hand, you have a disciple who really knows Jesus, who's willing to follow Jesus. The contrast is stark, but it's not the end of the story.

Because the passage concludes in verses 70 to 71 with some rather astonishing statements. Before Peter and the others get any idea that they are following Jesus because of some insight or ability that they have, Jesus reminds them, the twelve, that they've been chosen. That he chose them.

Have I not chosen you, the twelve? In a similar way, in Matthew chapter 16, after Peter makes this great confession of Jesus as the Son of the living God, Jesus makes it clear that Peter didn't figure this out on his own. He says, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by

my Father in heaven. And so Jesus is making it very clear.

At the heart, the very heart of discipleship is the reality of a sovereign God. It's the reality of the sovereign grace of God. Verse 37, earlier in John chapter 6, Jesus says it is the Father who gives him true disciples.

Verse 43, he says, No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. In verse 65, he says, This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. In John 15, later in chapter 15, verse 16, he says, You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

We come now, in these final words of John chapter 6, to the real dilemma of discipleship for all of us. Because you see, one of the dilemmas is the call that Jesus makes to us to radical discipleship, to radical obedience. There is a cost to being a disciple of Jesus.

There is a cross. We must take up the cross and follow Jesus. And I think most of us can understand that.

Even though we find it difficult to do, we can understand that Jesus demands of us certain things, and if we're going to believe, if we're going to follow, there's radical obedience required if we truly want to know our Lord. But there is, in this passage, an even deeper dilemma. And it's this.

In the end, in the end, it's not ultimately our choice. Jesus calls us to discipleship. He calls us to follow him.

He chooses us. We do not choose him. The Father enables disciples to come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this turns everything we know and believe about discipleship, about decision making, about having our own free will, it turns all of that on its head. Because when all is said and done, you see, discipleship, being a disciple of Jesus, doesn't have to do with a little more sweat and tears. It has to do with God's grace.

With God's sovereign grace at work in our lives. The Lord graciously invites us into His life and enables us to have fellowship with Him in His suffering and in His glory. It is His call to us.

It is His invitation to us. It is His grace at work in our lives. It's not something we do to Jesus as a way somehow of something we give to Him to earn being a disciple, but it is that He invites us graciously to follow Him.

Now the perplexing thing is that Judas represents the flip side of this understanding of discipleship. Because Judas is one of the twelve chosen by Jesus, but he's also the one who betrays Jesus. And how can we understand this? Bruce Milne, in his commentary on John, says this.

He says, Here we encounter the mystery of sin and unbelief as it interfaces with the purpose of God. That Judas was personally chosen in order to do the work of the betrayer is to us unthinkable. Yet Jesus, who knows all hearts, recognized the terrible possibility within Judas, even as he afforded him the supreme and surpassing privilege of belonging to the twelve.

Judas, yes, by his own will, by his own choice, by his own decision, betrays our Lord. But Judas was also one of the twelve, one of those chosen by Jesus to be a disciple, and at this point, one of the disciples who did not turn and walk away. Now, it would be very easy for me to conclude this message tonight with a call for commitment to discipleship.

And my preacher's instinct tells me that this is probably a good thing to do and the right thing to do, because really here you have three portraits of discipleship before you. Are you like the disciples who defected and deserted Jesus? Are you like Judas who betrayed Jesus ultimately? Or are you like Peter who confessed Jesus as the Holy One of God? I mean, those are the choices. Those are the portraits, the pictures of discipleship put up before us in this passage.

And the question, I suppose, is which portrait of discipleship do you want to paint yourself into? But the problem, you see, is that this passage is not, when all is said and done, a call to discipleship. It is rather a description of the dilemma of discipleship. And the reason the world is no friend to grace is because you don't choose grace.

You don't control God's grace. You don't manipulate God's grace. God's grace breaks into your life.

God's grace turns your life upside down. God's grace makes demands of you. God's grace pours into your life and changes you so that you can never be the same again and so that you cannot help but take up the cross and deny self and follow Jesus.

You see, being a disciple of Jesus is not something we choose on our own terms, in our own time, to do the way that we want to do. Rather, it is radical obedience to the claim of Jesus enabled by the work of the Spirit in our lives according to the will of the Father. And you become a disciple of Jesus when you acknowledge that there is nowhere and no one else to go to for eternal life.

You become a disciple when you confess that Jesus is the Holy One of God. You become a disciple when you believe that Jesus has chosen you. And you become a disciple when you realize that your only choice, really, in life and in death, is simply to respond to the grace of God, the sovereign grace of God which has broken into your life, love and grace breaking through to the core of your existence.

So what am I saying? Tonight, I'm not asking you to try a little harder. I'm not asking you to sweat a little more in your Christian life or to dig down a little deeper to perhaps persevere a little more. I'm not asking you necessarily to become a Bonhoeffer or an Eliot because, you see, all of that presumes somehow that it's up to you.

Rather, tonight, on the basis of the authority of the Word of God in this passage, I'm inviting you to consider what this passage reveals to us about Jesus Christ. And I'm inviting you to consider, perhaps for the first time, that Jesus may indeed be and is the Holy One of God for you, and that he's issuing a call and making a claim for your life. I'm not asking you to choose him.

I'm not inviting you tonight to follow him. I'm asking you to take a hard, long, hard look at who Jesus is. And as you gaze upon his beauty and his majesty and his glory, to be drawn in by his grace and to hear his words to you tonight, have I not chosen you? And when you hear that word, then, my friend, you begin to understand what it means to be a disciple.

Lord, tonight we acknowledge that these words of our Lord in Scripture are hard words, that these are hard sayings. Who can understand them? But we acknowledge in the midst of it all your sovereign grace and your claim upon us. And so tonight we just wait upon you in prayer, in your holy presence.

We ask you to come, Lord Jesus, to make your claim upon our lives so that we might indeed be enabled to become the disciples you want us to become through Christ our Lord.

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