



John 6:61-69

Our Great Heritage 5  
Grace-Tucson, AZ

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<sup>61</sup> Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, “Does this offend you? <sup>62</sup> What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! <sup>63</sup> The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. <sup>64</sup> 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. <sup>65</sup> He went on to say, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”

<sup>66</sup> From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.

<sup>67</sup> “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

<sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Our glimpse into Reformation history this morning introduces us to a battle between two historical heavyweights: Martin Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam. Both were trained as priests and theologians, however Erasmus was a humanist. Humanism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the ability of human beings and prizes reason and rational thought.

Erasmus wrote a personal and public attack against Luther and the things he was writing. It was called “*The Freedom of the Will*.” As a humanist, he claimed that human beings possess a free will and therefore have the ability to either choose to believe in God or reject God. He did speak of grace, but for him, grace was simply something God gave to support people as they used their free will. In speaking this way, he was claiming that when it comes to salvation, God and a person each make a contribution. Salvation is both earned and by grace. Faith and salvation are really a cooperative effort by an individual and God; a partnership.

There are many, many Christians who believe this today. It could be that you have been under this impression as well. The truth is, any church or any individual who suggests that there is something good in us, a part of us that makes a choice to trust in God—and that each person has this “free will” to choose—is following the teaching of the humanist Erasmus. Most do not realize that Erasmus’ notion of “free will” was quite similar to an ancient false teaching, rejected by Christians all the way back in the 400s.

Well, Luther responded to Erasmus with a document of his own—now a classic work on the sinful nature and the grace of God. It is called “*The Bondage of the Will*.” In this writing, Luther did not develop or teach a new doctrine. He did, one by one, refute the false teaching of Erasmus by pointing to the clear words of the Bible that speak about the total corruption of the sinful nature and the sovereign grace of God. He used the words of Jesus and many passages from the Apostles Paul and John to explain that there is no good in the sinful nature—no desire nor any ability to choose God—and that it is entirely God’s grace that brings a person to faith and that it is CHRIST ALONE who saves.

In our lesson from John’s gospel, the emphasis is on CHRIST ALONE. Jesus himself describes the inability of a person to come to faith on their own and the necessity of God granting faith. As we consider what it means that we are saved by **CHRIST ALONE**, we’ll hear Jesus explain:

1. THE TRUTH ABOUT SALVATION and witness
2. REACTIONS TO THE TRUTH

Our lesson begins like this: **Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this...**

It is especially important this morning that we know what the “this” is that had his disciples so upset. If you were to look back at Jesus’ statements that caused this reaction, this is what you’d find:

- He had just said that he had come down to earth from heaven.
- That a person must believe in him in order to have eternal life.
- *And that no one can come to faith unless the Father pulls them away from unbelief to faith. [The Greek word translated “draw” in v.44 means to pull or drag with force because of the inability of the object to move on its own!]*

We’ll talk more about the reactions of everyone who heard all of this in a little bit, but it was their reactions that led Jesus to explain further. We are fortunate to have this extended explanation about salvation in CHRIST ALONE so that we ourselves understand it better and are better prepared to share it with others—and even so that we are prepared for people’s reactions when we proclaim this truth.

## THE TRUTH ABOUT SALVATION

Jesus addressed the confusion that existed about spiritual life and salvation then, and which still exists today, with this statement of truth: **The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.**

What Jesus does here is contrast the spiritual nature with the sinful nature. When it comes to spiritual life (faith and the salvation that comes by faith) **the flesh counts for nothing**, Jesus says. Our sinful flesh does nothing as far as salvation goes. A person does not *choose* to have faith in God, cannot *decide* to believe in God, has no *desire* to love God. There are numerous places throughout Scripture that emphasize the totally corrupt thing the sinful nature of every person is. They point out that people are spiritually dead, blind to the things of God, and violently opposed to God. These all reveal the impossibility of there being anything good in a person that could possibly choose faith in God. When it comes to spiritual life and faith and salvation, Jesus succinctly says **the flesh counts for nothing**.

So how is it that a person comes to believe in Christ and put their hope of salvation in him? **The Spirit gives life**, Jesus says. The consistent Jesus told this same truth to Nicodemus, the Pharisee who came to talk with him under cover of darkness and ultimately put his faith in him. Jesus told Nicodemus, **Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (John 3:6)**. Only sinful flesh comes from sinful flesh and spiritual life comes only from the Spirit of God.

Long after Jesus finally did ascend into heaven, the Apostle Paul continued the teaching of Jesus when he wrote: **No one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3)**. Only the Holy Spirit can breathe faith into a sinful person and bring forth a confession of faith in Christ. **The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing**. Jesus again emphasized the impossibility of a person coming to faith in him unless God made it happen by saying, **“This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.”**

And when he said, **The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life**, Jesus reminds us that the Word is the means that God uses to create faith in Christ. You may know this from another part of Scripture where God explains like this: **Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17)**.

This is what happened with you and me! The Word of God combined with the water of baptism or the Word of God simply proclaimed and taught are what brought each Christian here today to faith in Jesus. Make no mistake—you and I did not decide on our own to believe in Christ! Jesus explains that this is impossible, that God does that work in our hearts, and he does that through his powerful Word.

Why is all of this talk about the sinful nature...and the grace of God...and this particular text used to bring our attention to CHRIST ALONE? Because of this: if in any way—even the *smallest* way—a person is saved by something they do, an action they take, a decision they make...then salvation would cease to be by Christ Alone. This is fact: Jesus is *entirely* responsible for our salvation. It was *his* sinless life, *his* death in our place, *his* resurrection from death. God the Father sent Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us the gift of faith in Christ. Salvation is centered on CHRIST ALONE!

If a person were take even 1% of the credit and give God the other 99%, then salvation would cease to be only because of Christ. That person would also have to ignore all of these direct words of Jesus and the many places in the Bible that point us to CHRIST ALONE. Our salvation is in CHRIST ALONE from beginning to end.

Perhaps we can take our cue from Martin Luther's *Bondage of the Will* and thank God that our faith and salvation are not dependent on a supposed "free will" in us, because then it would be an uncertain thing! Since it is by CHRIST ALONE, we have the comfort of knowing that our salvation is in God's hands and not our own. God will be faithful to his promise to save us—not on the basis of what we do, but according to his great grace. (*Bondage of the Will*, Argument 18)

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## REACTIONS TO THE TRUTH

While Martin Luther found great comfort in this truth about salvation being found in CHRIST ALONE—and I hope you do also—we find that even when the words came directly out of Jesus' mouth, there were different reactions to it.

Jesus explained further because there was grumbling among those who were following him; they were offended by what he said. This group of disciples, or followers, was obviously a larger group than just the Twelve. Jesus told them a three-fold truth: He had come from heaven; he was the only Savior; God is the one who gives faith to trust in Jesus for salvation. But he could read their hearts: **"Yet there are some of you who do not believe,"** he said.

The consistent message from God in Scripture is that he wants everyone to be saved. He wants all people to trust in him as their Savior. And even though Jesus was speaking the truth about salvation and the Holy Spirit was working through those saving gospel words, some did not believe. "Why?" is our natural question.

The simple answer is this: human beings do not possess free will to choose God, their natural reaction is to reject God. Despite God's love for sinners and his desire for them to love and trust in him in return, the sinful nature wants nothing to do with God. This rejection was on display as Jesus spoke. And so, **From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.** Dependent on their own reason, insisting on their own way of thinking about salvation instead of the Spirit-filled explanations of Jesus, they stopped listening.

Murmuring and complaining, many in the crowd began to leave. They could not bear to listen to Jesus any longer. As they walked away, our Savior asked his closest followers, **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"**

It's then that we get to witness the grace of God work in a sinful man, penetrating heart and soul, overcoming opposition to God, and granting the confidence of faith. Simon Peter responds to his Savior with some of the most beautiful words of trust you'll ever hear: **"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."**

Peter knew that it was true that Jesus had come from heaven to be the Savior. As we heard him preach in the second lesson this morning, he knew that salvation was to be found in no one else. And if you were to look at the book of 1 Peter, you would find this: **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time (1:3-5).** Did you hear it there? In mercy God has *given* us new birth and salvation in Christ. Peter went on to preach and write these very things Jesus taught them that day. That we are saved by CHRIST ALONE is a timeless truth.

As you and I, like Peter, share the gospel message that we are saved by CHRIST ALONE, we too will experience these reactions. Some will reject the loving message of salvation in Jesus and they will walk away. Our job is not to convince, but simply to share. Some would not listen to Jesus himself and some will not listen to us.

We are called by God to be faithful in sharing because the Holy Spirit works through that saving Word and will convert some. As we share CHRIST ALONE, we may also witness that Spirit-worked change in a sinner's heart. We may hear a confession of faith like Peter's, that Jesus is the only one to turn to, the only one whose words bring eternal life, the only Holy One of God.

Take comfort that your salvation is by CHRIST ALONE from beginning to end and share that saving truth with others that they too might have the comfort you have received from God. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**